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The Importance of Our Stories BY DAVID E. NELSON

In preparation for a business trip and personal holiday in Ireland, a friend loaned me the book *Ireland* by Frank Delaney. I will have finished the book by the time you read this and my wife and I will be in Ireland enjoying a place we have never been before. The author's note at the beginning of the book is a delicious reminder of the role our personal stories play in the molding of our lives.

"We merge our myths with our facts according to our feelings, we tell ourselves our own story. And no matter what we are told, we choose what we believe. All 'truths' are only our truths, because we bring to the 'facts' our feelings, our experiences, our wishes. Thus, storytelling - from wherever it comes - forms a layer in the foundation of the world; and glinting in it we see the trace elements of every tribe on earth."

Storytelling is what we do as human beings. During the summer, we shared time with family members, college classmates, and various other groups. Much of the time was spent telling stories. We remembered events from the past we had shared together. We told yarns about other times and places. In a sense, every telling of a story will in some way change the content. It is not that we are dishonest, although that is also a possibility; it is just that a story creates a life of its own.

As a professional speaker, I have certain "signature stories" I have shared with different groups in different situations. Sometimes when I am asked to speak or facilitate training, I am requested to share the "Miss Loomis Story" or the "Marvin and Lincoln Story." These stories have lifted the hearts of people and touched a place inside their brains creating new possibilities. Each telling creates something new.

As a parent, there are stories our children request we tell over and over. Pranks at college or in our own youth are favorite topics when the Nelson clan gathers. These memories become a bit embellished in the telling, and we all love recognizing the differences.

Stories engage both hemispheres of the brain. Stories connect with both the head and the heart. A good story invites listeners to remember events in their own personal journeys that have shaped their lives. The human brain is an amazing organ that makes wonderful links between thoughts, feelings, and experiences.



David Cooperrider, in his pioneering work with organizations, has documented that organizations, like people, move in the direction of the stories they tell. With human organizations, the telling of past events both reminds us where we have been and shapes us to move into the future. A family or a business is shaped by the stories that are told and retold. This can be both a bane and a blessing. When an organization relates success stories, it will propel the organization in the direction of more success. The opposite is true as well.

In the management of a large or small dental office, it is important to keep this in mind. What happens in the conference room, in the lab, and in the dental operator is critical for the excellence we expect in our work. What happens in the waiting rooms and in the lunchrooms is also an important part of the high quality you aim to provide. Listen to the conversations. Tune in to the stories that are shared and you will soon discover the reality being created. Positive stories create positive energy. Recognizing victories opens up greater possibilities for more victories in the future. It is all about energy, and positive energy is very contagious.

Stories about the dentist have been shared in our household for my entire life. We have been good customers for a number of dentists in a number of communities. Not all those stories are flattering and some of them are not even true, but literal truth is not what counts. "All truths are our truths." To understand me,

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it is vital you listen to my truth even though it may not be literally factual or be congruent with your truth. I want to create new possibilities for my children and grandchildren so I am selective of the stories I will share about my experiences in the dental chair.

It's important to provide excellent service and to create and maintain positive space for the clients you serve. In staff meetings, talk about the language used in the office and waiting rooms. Remember language creates reality. Be intentional in the conversations that are shared for the public and overheard by the public. Talk about success stories and positive encounters that have added value to the customer and to the staff.

Most organizations I have collaborated with have conducted surveys from time to time in order to find ways to better serve their customers and clients. These instruments usually consist of a series of questions about what worked and what did not work. Some human resources people spend much of their time

addressing problems and trying to repair what is not working. When you design your next survey, at least entertain the idea of only asking for what worked. You will learn more from your successes than from your mistakes.

The stories we tell each other create meaning and shape us for the future. The literal accuracy is secondary to the “truths” they contain. I really appreciated the voice-over during the opening scene in the movie “Great Expectations.” It starts: “I will tell you this story not as it happened, but as I remember it.”

Your stories can create new life and energy for you and for your organization. Tell them well and listen to them with open ears and minds. 

Dr. David Nelson is an “Appreciative Inquiry Coach.”
FMI: *The Human Agenda, www.humanagenda.com,*

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