

SCENE 1

STORYTELLING. IT'S A POWERFUL THING

Storytelling is one of the most personal and powerful things we can do.

You know this. It's why you picked up this book.

Brené Brown says that storytelling is 'data with a soul'.¹ I love sharing this with my clients, who generally think that data is boring. Whether you are a data analyst, high school teacher or startup founder, pretty much anyone, anywhere on the planet, agrees that stories are powerful – but so much of it is in the telling.

¹ She coined this phrase in her first ever TED talk, before she was famous. To date, 'The Power of Vulnerability' has over 58m views and this is the first thing she says. Watch it at https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability

The Storytelling Hero

So many times, our presentations get lost in translation. We think someone has heard us but their takeaway has actually been something completely different. Or worse, behind their earnest nodding, they have already switched off and are secretly thinking about lunch (poached eggs and smashed avocado on sourdough does it for me. . .).

I bet that you didn't wake up this morning saying to yourself, 'Today I want to be really boring and totally forgettable.' And yet most presentations end up that way. Why is that? Do we just have to accept that some people are great at presenting and some are not? I don't think so. I genuinely believe that anyone can be a great presenter by learning to be a great storyteller. (Unless, that is, they don't want to be. Or unless they think they are already brilliant and don't need any help!)

What if people could actually hear what you wanted to say? What if you could take a template, something that I have seen work time and time again with my clients, and apply it to every presentation, conversation and encounter?

Because a presentation doesn't just mean a meaty, 20-minute TED talk. It might be the 30-second introduction to a meeting, the three-minute update, the snatched conversation in a corridor, the job interview. . . In fact, it's every time you open your mouth to try and persuade anyone of anything. And the key to an unforgettable presentation is storytelling.

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Great storytelling is a lifelong skill, from business meetings to initiating new relationships, from having drinks in a pub to standing in line at a barbecue. And telling stories well is what makes life more memorable. In *Time and How to Spend It*, James Wallman spends an entire chapter talking about the psychological importance of stories. He argues that the telling of stories is not a nice-to-have, but is critical for our happiness, because stories provide unity, purpose and meaning.

This is incredible.

Hands up if you would like more unity, purpose and meaning?

So, as we embark on the journey of storytelling, of creating and delivering presentations that make a difference, here are two things that I want you to tattoo to your hands and your forehead:

1. A story is *22 times more memorable* than a fact.²
2. The brain is wired to process *two-thirds of all the information it ever receives* in picture.³

² Check out Dr Jennifer Aaker, General Atlantic Professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, talking about this here: <https://womensleadership.stanford.edu/stories>

³ This excellent article from the University of Rochester will tell you more about the research that led to this fact: https://www.rochester.edu/pr/Review/V74N4/0402_brainscience.html

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You have picked up this book because you want to be able to present better than you do right now. You may have a particular presentation coming up, or you may simply be deeply aware that the only way to get people to listen to you is to learn to speak really, really well. I can get you there, but it will take more than the act of just making it to the end of this book. It will require a *doing*. I am going to give you some exercises to do and we are going to use your story as a template.

Let me assure you from the start, I understand the journey you are about to go on and the moments where you will want to give up. I've been there – literally. Every exercise I ask you to try, I have done myself and have conducted with thousands of others. I will guide you through all the obstacles you will face in your quest to become the storytelling hero you never thought you could be.

So, as I invite you to leave your familiar world of average presentations and set out on a quest for storytelling greatness, I would like to share with you my own journey – the tale of how I got here, to my promised land of storytelling.

My Story

The story I am about to tell you comes straight from my gut. It is a story I share with my clients when

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I coach them, and I have been sharing it for the past 10 years. Whenever I share this, I emphasise different elements for different audiences, but the essence is always the same. I should warn you that it is real and emotional.

I grew up in Manchester and went to a private all-boys school – one of the best in the country, apparently (according to the league tables anyway). But I couldn't play football, or rugby, and from pretty much day one I was bullied. It started out physical and then turned verbal. Maybe it was because I didn't have the physicality to stand my ground or the words to fight back – either way, I was an easy target.

When I was 13, I auditioned for a TV show and to my complete surprise I got in. But the bullying had been so bad that I approached my new form teacher in the September before filming was due to start and said:

Mr Stubbs, I have just got into a TV show. It means I'll be out of school quite a bit this term. Please don't tell anyone in the form because it will be really difficult for me if everyone knows. I've already been bullied and I would rather no one knew.

Mr Stubbs nodded, stood up from his chair, cleared his throat and said, 'Stewart – stand here.' I stood on the small platform at the front of class thinking, surely

he won't say anything? And then I heard these words: 'Boys, Stewart here has got into a TV show so he won't be at school much this term.'

It was the nail in the coffin.

My life in school was over.

The bullying got really intense the minute the TV show came out. People I didn't know would stop me in the corridor saying things like, 'You can't act.' Or even, 'I've shagged your mum.' All the usual stuff from a boys' private school, brimming with testosterone. But it got so bad that I remember being shouted out of classrooms every day at lunch. Boys would literally not stop shouting until I left my own form room, or any other room. I remember wandering the halls on my own, trying to find somewhere I could just breathe. I found it in the toilets and with the cleaners. They were kind. They didn't shout at me or bring my mum into it. They seemed to like me. And to find me funny.

Maybe that was all I needed to keep going, because somehow I did. I kept acting. I'd lost my voice, my ability to be strong with my peers, but I found it in playing parts and I found it in delivering speeches in assembly. And despite the horrendous bullying that I endured for many, many years, I found myself on the stage at the age of 18, in the Memorial Hall, giving an assembly to over 600 pupils.

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I remember walking through a sea of navy blue uniforms as I made my way up to the stage. There was a wooden throne behind me and an enormous organ over to the left. I stood in front of the school and for 20 minutes I told the story of how I had been treated. I said I didn't need their pity but they needed to know that they were arrogant.

I ended the assembly by saying this: 'There's a quote in the High Master's office by Aristotle, written in gold leaf on the wall. And it says this, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit."'

I said, 'I think we should change that to: "We are what we repeatedly do. Arrogance, therefore, is not an act but a habit."' Thank you very much.'

I sat down expecting boos. What I got was thunderous applause. My Religious Studies teacher had her hands above her head and would not stop clapping. No-one stopped clapping. The Middle School Master got up to end the assembly, looked at the faces of the boys, listened to the sound of the applause and sat back down. It was utterly astonishing. And in those minutes that felt like forever, I didn't fully realise that I had found my voice again.

Fast forward to 2011. I'd been acting professionally for ten years. My friend Mia asked me to help her present

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a talk and I thought, ‘Well, I’ll have a go.’ She was so nervous that when she spoke literally nothing came out. She lost her voice. It was pretty extreme. I gave her a couple of exercises on how to stand tall, and breathe, and project her voice.

And her voice exploded.

Mia got her voice back. And that’s when Amplify, my business, started.

It’s now 2022. I’ve helped 14,000 people tell their stories. I’ve travelled around the globe (when that was allowed!) and I’ve worked for some of the top companies in the world.

But the truth is, it’s not about the names.

Success is about being present to the people in front of me. And every time I get to coach someone now – over Zoom or over Teams or in person – I find another piece of another person’s story put back together, and that’s another part of my healing and my living out, helping me unlock my voice and helping others unlock theirs.

So that’s my story, in two and a half minutes. It’s emotional. It’s real. It’s raw. And it’s why I am here today.

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When I share this in the room it gives people permission to share their own stories. If I can do it, then they can do it. If I can set the tone for what is required of great storytelling, then they can reach for that standard. Now it's your turn – let's get going on your journey to becoming a storytelling hero!