

## “Listen, or thy tongue will keep thee deaf”

### SUMMARY

We’d like to show you, or rather invite you to listen to, two pieces of work from the Sparknow portfolio. And we’d like to use these two case studies to explore two linked questions:

The first relates to **listening** and **being heard**. What is the story-listening role of leaders? How can they make themselves heard?

The second question relates to the **layers of meaning** and insight held within our stories.

Related to this are some subsidiary questions:

- How much complexity should we seek to acknowledge when we deal with stories?
- How can fact and fiction be used to raise important questions?
- How should organisations handle contradictory versions of the past?
- How do you get young people to find the useful learning in revisionist versions of past episodes?
- How do we encourage leaders to honour both the practical and the (uncomfortable) emotional aspects of the stories they tell and listen to?

We’re looking at particular aspects of two ‘factional’<sup>1</sup> assignments here to start with and then we make some general reflections which seek to explore these questions and the issues they raise.

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<sup>1</sup> Faction. A careful blend of truth and what Alice Munro would call ‘canny lying’.

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### **THE CASE STUDIES**

We were invited in to the Department of Citizenship & Immigration to do something called ‘Deep Dive’ narrative work, alongside other story practices who were coaching leaders in storytelling. We were working with the front line of the organisation (those who handle the citizen surveillance and services) to find their experiences and stories of a merger. We were to convey this voice of experience honestly and carefully back to the newish senior management in such a way that due attention would be paid to it. Let’s call this client the Department of Citizen & Immigration (**DC&I**).

For another client (which we’ll call **RESDA**, the Responsible EarthSea Development Agency), we were invited to work collaboratively with professionals at all levels of seniority to help develop a strategic framework for knowledge management that would serve their new 10-year strategy and vision. In parallel, we undertook lengthy oral histories with 12 Founders of the Agency. These oral histories were to illuminate the founding ambition and experiences of the Agency so that that the new generation of Young Professionals could draw on this heritage when leading the Agency forward.

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### **THE BACKGROUND TO DC&I**

A couple of years previously two Departments had merged to form a new organisation called the Department of Citizenship & Immigration. The merger triggered the loss of some staff through redundancy, and the move of some of the areas that deals more directly with surveillance systems and border control into a new, separate, agency.

Some of the new leaders came from the private sector and on entry faced the task of unifying 2 public sector organisations with distinct personalities and rich histories, low staff turnover, each with a strong sense of a mission to serve the citizens well, but with missions carried in out very different ways technically even were processes looked apparently similar.

It was seen as a leadership issue. Leaders and senior management (and I quote from their own materials here) had

“a particular responsibility to create and promulgate a rich, evocative, convincing and aligned picture of the new organisation, including the desired culture and behaviours.”

The starting point was to run a 6-month trial with 3 parts to it:

- Firstly, working with senior management to develop the ‘big picture of change’ story.
- Secondly, working with managers to articulate the big picture.
- **Thirdly, what they called ‘Deep Dive’ narrative research to understand and feedback behaviours at the frontline.**

Three different groups of story practitioners were used for this trial; Sparknow undertook the ‘Deep Dive’ element.

What was our task? It was (and I’m quoting from our brief here)

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1. To understand how staff were feeling, get a sense of their perceptions about the change
2. To give them a chance to share their views and be heard
3. To find stories to bring the change to life and to illustrate current behaviours, positive and negative
4. To help business areas better understand where they could make local changes
5. And feed back the stories and views to the Management Board, the senior management, to show up the gap between ambition and reality and suggest ways of closing it.

We also had to get all this done in the space of about 6 weeks late last spring. Although in practice the fifth, final part, which was the report to the Board, happened after a gap.

### **SO WHAT DID WE DO?**

Because time was short, we decided that the condensed experience of workshop was probably the only way to get all this done. So we held 3 pairs of 1-day workshops in each of three business areas, actively supported by local business sponsors who helped round up almost 150 participants in total.

The workshops were designed to take those participants on a kind of **narrative journey**, from personal to organisational, from private memory and factual stories, to shared fantasy... This dynamic proved invaluable later on when the time came to play the stories back. And we'll come to that.

From these workshops 35 stories were recorded, around 5 hours of materials, stories ranging between 2 minutes and 4 or 5 minutes in length, and from apparently virtually storyless qualities – just a report of a conversation – to stories entitled things like:

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‘Snow White and the Seven Vertically Challenged Civil Servants’, about the assignment of roles & responsibilities in the merged entity.

‘The Car in Front’ about a car manufacturer where the parts were from Volvo, the process from Toyota and the instruction manual from Ford?

‘Recycled Geezers’ a story about the inappropriate merger of a scrapyards and an old people’s home.

They let their imaginations run riot, in a way which certainly surprised us. I think it surprised them too.

### **THE ROLE OF STORIENTEERS, THE CASTING OF SPARKNOW**

Two apparently small, but essential aspects of the design. We had people from DC&I, **volunteers**, who came to style themselves as ‘**storienteers**’ (due to a mishearing in fact, not a planned label). We enlisted this group of “insiders” to be our listeners, to hear the more subtle unstated layers of meaning behind the stories being shared. Their job in the workshops was to prompt those with more sensitive or provocative stories to have a private conversation with our workshop custodian and *rapporteur*. Their ears were vital.

We also made a quite complex **casting** decision about our role in the workshops. At the outset of each workshop we stood up and said that our job was **not** to make them happy, **not** to fire them up, **not** give them a good time, and certainly **not** to change them in any way. Our job, we said was to listen well; to create a space in which normally private or sensitive issues could be aired safely. We were there to make sure that their voices would reach and be heard by senior management. We were to act as **custodians**.

They seemed relieved not to be under scrutiny. And also a little disturbed that we were so willing to let the mood deepen, even to despair, and leave them to find ways to haul themselves out of it, rather than take on that responsibility ourselves. And we did. For us too it was uncomfortable, not

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an easy line to hold. But it seemed the right approach. (Quite a bit more could be said about the implications and challenges of managing the boundaries consequent on choosing this approach, but this is probably for another paper.)

### **FEEDING BACK TO THE CLIENT**

So we had done a pretty good job of understanding how people feeling. We'd given them a fair chance to share their views and we'd certainly found stories to bring the change to life ... although they were not exactly the stories the senior management had in mind.

And of course we wrote reports back to each of the three business areas to help them understand where they could make local changes.

So that just left us with our fifth and final task: “to feed back the stories and views to the Board - the senior management - and to show up the gap between ambition and reality and suggest ways of closing it.”

And this was the task that really posed us a challenge:

How were we to report back to the senior management, the Board of the great and the good, some **uncomfortable** truths told through the medium of **fantastical** tales?

How were we to create a listening space in which the Board might listen undefensively and be touched by what they heard. Be open to a story called, say, “Snow White and the Seven Vertically Challenged Civil Servants” and that it might hold a truth that they needed to take on board?

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And if that wasn't bad enough, we were to get only 20 minutes at the end of a 3 hour board meeting.

While we were chewing over this challenge, some inspiration came from a very unlikely source. I'd like to tell you about this before getting back to the Board meeting.

### **THE DWARF**

At the time, Victoria was reading **Herman Hesse's Fairy Tales**<sup>2</sup>. They are an odd mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Some of them also touch on the theme of storytelling and among these it was the first Fairy Tale, called “The Dwarf”, which caught her attention. It is an old story of a beautiful lady, a love potion, fidelity, infidelity – “all that is at the heart of every adventure and tale, old and new”, as Hesse says. The Dwarf is a master storyteller, whose job is to entertain his mistress. Here is an excerpt where Hesse describes Filippo the Dwarf's unique style of storytelling.

“He had learned the art of storytelling in the Orient, where storytellers are highly regarded. Indeed, they are magicians and play with the souls of their listeners as a child plays with a ball.

His stories rarely began in foreign countries, for the minds of listeners cannot easily fly there on their own powers. Rather, he always began with things that people can see with their own eyes, whether it be a golden clasp or a silk garment. Then he led the imagination of his mistress imperceptibly wherever he wanted, talking first about the people who had previously owned the jewels or about the makers and sellers of the jewels. The story floated naturally and slowly from the balcony of the palace into the boat of the trader and drifted from the boat into the harbour and onto the ship and to the farthest spot of the world. It did not matter who his listeners were. They would all actually imagine themselves on this voyage, and while they sat quietly in Venice, their minds would wander about serenely or anxiously on distant seas and in fabulous regions. Such was the way Filippo told his stories.”

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<sup>2</sup> “The Fairy Tales of Herman Hesse, translated by Jack Zipes.

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This need to lure the listener from the believable into the fabulous was very much on our minds as we thought about our 20-minute slot. Working with the CD&I team, and with the story pair who had been working with senior leaders on their storytelling we decided to be doubly bold. We would start by running a listening to limber them up, get their ears working.

Then, we would play them three of the stories, unedited, the raw voices from the workshop. The first would be factual, a positive personal experience of the organisation changing, something, to quote Hesse, they could “see with their own eyes”. We would follow this with an absurd Kafkaesque story about a day in the life of an immigration inspector (and the obstacles put in his way while he is was simply trying to make a visit). This was a story we at Sparknow would describe as ‘factional’, all the elements based in truth, but not a true story. Finally we would plunge into the fantastical and end with one of the more wicked tales about the merger. And here, in this last category, as you have heard, we were spoiled for choice.

Then we would invite the Board’s feedback and build on it with our own commentary. And that would be our 20 minutes.

### **WHAT HAPPENED AT THE MEETING?**

Here are two of the three stories. The first story - which the teller called ‘Feedback’ - was the one we opened with on the day. It was one of the stories told privately to our curator, rather than in public, which you can tell by the chattering in the background.

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“This story is about feedback. I’d been in the Department of Citizenship for 17 years. Went out to work in the private sector for 3 years for 3 years, then came back. In the 17 years I’ve been in the Department, I’d never received any verbal praise whatsoever for work that I’d done.

Shortly after I came back we were in a meeting with some policy people. It was soon clear there were lots of problems with what they were suggesting. And I spoke out probably more than I should have done....

The following day in the shower I thought to myself that maybe I’d slightly overegged the criticism and maybe spoken out too much and when I got the office, the senior gentleman from the meeting called me into a room and said he thought he ought to give me some feedback as I’d only just joined. I expected this to be very negative

feedback, having spoken a bit too much and being fairly junior in the whole scheme of things. But it was quite the opposite. It was to the effect that what I’d said was thoughtful, intelligent, thought through. And that I had said things that were very valuable and that the lady running the project had emailed him to say that the meeting went very well, and a lot of things had been taken on board that they hadn’t considered before. He said to me that if I continued to act in that open and honest way he would like to work with me in future and the initiative was subsequently dropped on the basis that it wasn’t going to be workable for a number of the reasons that we as an office had put forward.

The point is I had feedback for the first time in 18 years in the department other than reports that had to be made. I was very pleased with that and hope it will continue.”

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So, we’ll skip the middle story, the absurd Kafkaesque tale of an immigration inspector – ‘A day in the life of Morris Miasma’. The sound quality of the third story we played in the Board meeting was too poor to play here so what you are about to hear was our second favourite: a story called “Recycled Geezers”:

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“I’m giving you this as the outcome of a study by a firm of accountants we have called Pricey Whitewash and Company. And it’s a report on how a company failed after starting off so promisingly and with such a good share price.

The owners of the two companies (which we’ve called Immi-Cycling and Citi-Geezers) decided it would be a really good idea to merge their two companies but in retrospect they’ve been unable to tell us why they came to this decision.

Immi-Cycling was a scrap merchant. Citi-Geezers ran a care home. Having decided that they would merge, and call the company Recycled Geezers they decided that they would co-locate because the care home had a lovely mansion in some very large grounds, and they realised that all the scrap sorting and recycling could be done in the grounds of the care home. As you can imagine, the amount of noise and pollution and dust was something to behold.

When they co-located they decided they had better share out the senior management jobs. So the waste manager of the scrapyard was appointed

the night orderly in charge of emptying the bedpans. The matron showed competences of being a dynamic leader with forthright views and not afraid to throw her weight around. So she became the gang leader of the vehicle crushing machine operators. No experience was required for these jobs, and no training was given and they couldn’t even find any instructions on the internet. Every time they went, of course, it was a forbidden site.

There was no way of the staff of the new care home/scrap merchants to escalate any concerns they might have about the new operations. And they could actually see elderly patients straying into the metal crushing plant. There was no way of drawing the managers’ attention to the problem, so unfortunately residents gradually became increasingly crushed as they wandered off into the grounds of the plant.

As a consequence of this the income started to drop, because the relatives of elderly people became concerned at the number of funerals that were taking place with the new company, and of course the costs were escalating to pay for all these funerals...”

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(In fact, this is quite a bit gentler than the story we actually played, which had quite a biting personification of the senior management in it. )

We’d done the icebreaker.

We’d played all three stories.

We waited.

And we waited.

For the silence to be broken.

And after a long pause, someone chips in and says...

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“Well I don’t think he showed much initiative, waiting 17 years. He should have asked for feedback before.”

There is a hiccup of hesitation in the room. Then someone else says

“That’s not what I heard at all. I heard that the management haven’t been good at giving positive feedback, but that’s changing.”

Then a third person

“And that the thing he really appreciated was the good feedback coming from someone other than his line manager. That’s a simple thing for us to encourage more of.”

And somebody else heard something different and in no time they were putting their different perspectives on what these stories told them about the state of the organisation, the readiness of people to change, their role as a management team, the creativity and wit which had been unleashed through the process. And so on.

And we let it run. Then in the couple of minutes I had left at the end, I simply made the point that they had heard what they needed to hear, and I reinforced a few points. Here are two:

1. Firstly, encourage stories that challenge the status quo. Be brave and make room for the anti-story, the dark side, to be vented inside organisational time and space and live with the consequences of that.
2. Secondly, don’t assume to lead is to tell stories. Try listening and building on what you hear. Think of yourself as a facilitator of a story environment. A maker of story-listening spaces, not just as a story-teller.

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### **SO HOW DO WE KNOW THIS SHORT EPISODE MADE A DIFFERENCE?**

Well, we've been told since by different people, of their experience of participating in that meeting – the pindropping moment after the stories had been played, while we waited to hear the Board's reaction. And we've been told of evidence of changes in management behaviour, frontline actions. Perhaps most telling, the Chairman closed the session by describing **storytelling as an essential new technology** for the Department, a technology it must put to work if it is to change its culture and rise to the challenge.

### **RESDA**

The next story is about how we used story approaches to meet a different challenge: how can a new generation of leaders be encouraged to properly hear, understand and learn from the critical experiences of their predecessors?

So this is where the story begins. Just over thirty years ago a set of statesmen took on the task of creating the world's Responsible EarthSea Development Agency, a multi-national Agency with a mission to build responsible infrastructure in 30 or so member countries. The founding fathers – many of whom were senior politicians in their own countries – built an institution unlike any other of its time: an agency with a social ambition to match its environmental remit. Their mission remains the same to this day although the geo-political environment, the scientific evidence about Earth & Sea and other factors have changed a great deal over 2 generations.

Sparknow was to help RESDA become a knowledge-resourceful agency, an institution that learns from itself and helps others to learn. One of the key challenges they were facing concerned the Founders, many of whom were either retired or about to retire. Some of them had served faithfully for

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long periods and witnessed the growth and challenges facing the Agency over long periods. They needed to know they were leaving a legacy. From the other side a whole new generation of leaders were about to move into position. So the question was how could the recollections, stories and experiences of these men and women be translated into a form - a precious resource - that the next generation would a) hear and b) make use of?”

Peeling back the layers, there were even more dimensions to the challenge - practical and emotional.

Elderly and distinguished, full of nostalgia and pride the Founders held the key to the values of the organisation... they feel the *raison d’être* and its in every fibre and are dedicated to their mission. But what could we do to ensure the stories, once recorded, were not heard by the younger generation as the rambling rose-tinted tales of beloved grandparents but instead as critical teaching stories with immediate and relevant messages? Put more bluntly, how do you get young people to listen to old people? How do you encourage that kind of listening? We had some ideas...

Mulling everything over, we conceived of a highly experimental oral histories project that ran over a period of about 5 months. There were broadly speaking two phases: PHASE I) collecting stories from the 12 Founders and PHASE II) building a rather glitzy multimedia website.

To create a sense of intrigue and fascination, we gave 5 of the more junior employees access to these most senior leaders by training them in our techniques. This helped to gently begin dissolving some of the more rigid structures and also created a real buzz around the project. In the second phase, we went for a really cutting-edge web interface that we felt should help draw the younger generation into the stories.

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All great in theory, but of course getting to this place was no mean feat. We had to figure out how to allow the leaders to tell what they wanted to, without challenge or interrogation from us and then to transpose this jumble of narrative material into a form that employees could hear rightly. When I say “rightly” I mean in the sense that Antoine de Saint-Exupery meant when he said in the Little Prince: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.” Our challenge was an emotional one: how to create the kind of emotional spaces inside people that would make them connect with the experiences being shared.

And there were yet more challenges. We had to decide whether it mattered that they would reinvent or glorify the past, whether they uttered more hagiography than autobiography, whether they contradicted each other and told 12 different versions of the same story. Such formidable challenges for narrative practitioners ... all centring on this idea of **truth**.

So in the end we decided to encourage RESDA to be comfortable with the idea that there could be multiple versions or perspectives. As in the previous case DC&I we left the stories quite raw, untidy, un-edited because we knew the discomfort could be productive. Above all we hoped to generate curiosity, to rouse people to listen actively not passively.

Making the website was fun and frustrating in equal measure. We took the 12 interviews and chopped them up, re-arranging the material according to common themes, dates, keywords and so on. When we launched it at their Annual Meeting last year there was great excitement as people explored the stories at their leisure in a never-ending labyrinth of sound and text.

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What you are about to hear is a 3-minute extract from a 20-minute story told to me during my interview one of the most highly respected Founders.

Before you listen I wonder if you could just imagine yourself in the shoes of Steph, listening to His Excellency who is now in his late 70s. Between sips of very strong cardamom-infused Turkish coffee in his office, in a Middle Easter country, she was conducting the interview with the aid of an interpreter because His Excellency was speaking in French – a language she is by no means fluent in. He had earlier remarked that she reminded him of his granddaughter.

Let me give you an overview of his story.

He began by saying that in 1983 he was sent on mission to Africa - a continent that was at that time in the grip of a terrible drought. On his return – the images of destruction and hopelessness fresh in his mind - he went to see the President of the Agency and encouraged him to go there and see the situation for himself.

Inspired by His Excellency, the President drove 3000 km on dirt roads across sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of this special journey he asked the Board of Governors to create a special fund for the region to provide prompt aid for the people. To have triggered this chain of events was one of His Excellency’s proudest achievements.

The following 3-minute excerpt should give you a flavour.

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“In 1984, Africa had just experienced an extremely serious drought in sub-Saharan Africa. The President had sent me on a mission. I went to Mali and Niger, concerning something else. It was there I discovered the damage that the drought had created. Farmers had nothing left to eat. The backwaters had dried up. Cattle were dying and I returned with these images in my head.

I presented a report to the President during a meeting of the Operations Committee. The President said to me, ‘Can you write for me what you have just written.’ I drew up a report on the drought in these countries. And the

President said to me, ‘I am going to conduct a mission to see this with my own eyes.’

He went on an extremely special assignment. He went to Ouagadougou, from Ouagadougou, he took the road to Dakar... by car, through areas where there were no asphalt roads. He took a car and he crossed Africa by car... Three to four thousand kilometres. He prepared a first aid kit, asked the official to bring a camera, and crossed Africa.

When he arrived back, he said to me, “we will ask the Board of Management to create a special fund.”

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When he’d finished telling this story His Excellency said something that really struck chord and plays well to today’s themes. He said:

“The lesson to draw out is that an institution of this nature cannot be managed by staying in the office. The office is extremely pleasant, we have air conditioning, etc... it is great but you need something more. You need to go out and see for yourself. You need to go out and you need to be able to listen. When you have seen and you have listened, you have to do something about it.”

### **CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTIONS**

We’d like to conclude with a few remarks which put these two cases side by side, and which bring back our opening questions on listening, and on layers and the challenge of truth.

It may seem surprising to you, but it was only when we put these two cases side by side that we noticed common themes of listening, power and tenure.

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### **Where does the power lie?**

In DC&I, the new are more powerful than those who have been in the organisation for a long time. But the “old timers” hold the key to the culture and values and to the fusion of the best of old with the new.

### **Listen or be heard?**

In RESDA, it is the old who have both power and the founding stories, but the young have the energy and the appetite for change. The Board of DC&I seem to have to find a way to listen in order to be heard. The Founders of RESDA need to find a way of making listening so that they can be heard with fresh ears.

We have also realised, with increasing intensity, the complexity of the layers of meaning in stories, and the challenge represented by so-called **truth**. As we said in our second question at the outset:

### **How do we encourage leaders to honour both the practical and the emotional aspects of the stories they tell and listen to?**

One slant on this comes from Karen Armstrong in her ‘Short History of Myth’<sup>3</sup>. In it, she disentangles “**mythos**” deep values and meaning - and “**logos**” - practical lessons and knowledge.

“In the pre-modern world, most people realised that myth and reason were complementary; each had its particular area of competence and human beings needed both these modes of thought.

A myth could not tell a hunter how to kill his prey or how to organise an expedition efficiently, but it helped him to deal with his complicated emotions about the killing of animals. Logos was efficient, practical and rational, but it could not answer questions about the ultimate value of human life nor could it mitigate human pain and sorrow.”

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<sup>3</sup> Canongate 2005

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This seems a useful distinction to hold in mind. Leaders need to be prepared to hear both parts – the mythical and the logical, the emotional as well as the practical. The mythical parts are inevitably more difficult to hear and digest. They are messy and often challenging. The ‘truths’ may be told through metaphor and symbol which challenges the tidier analytical frames in which senior management feel comfortable conversing. As we hope our stories show, it is important for leaders to acknowledge different versions of reality, to work with practical and emotional, stated and unstated truths and above all else to listen well.

And if they are to nurture good listening, perhaps like Hesse’s Dwarf, leaders need to tell stories that begin with the matter-of-fact, the real ... and then gently float is into new imaginative spaces. Creating this kind of story space – two-way process, a dialogue – is a different approach to the traditional “storytelling as leadership” model.

We’d like to end with the quote that originally inspired us to pull this presentation together in this way. As we told you, we have considered, and discarded many titles for this presentation. But its genesis, and our original title for it, comes from a book called ‘Dangerous Angels’ by Francesca Lia Block.

“Think about the word destroy’ the man said. ‘Do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see?”

And restore... that’s re-story.

Do you know that only two things that have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching.

Telling your story is touching. It sets you free.”

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Leaders (& followers) – by not listening – have the power to de-story their organisations, to dissolve the power behind each person’s voice by choosing not to hear it. On the other hand, if they choose to listen well, they can re-story their organisations. To do this they must be willing to touch and be touched with stories, to be vulnerable, to be resilient to criticism and hear and play those voices back in a way that liberates others and equips them to act.

END