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The Power of Storytelling

with Ari Shapiro

Course Guidebook

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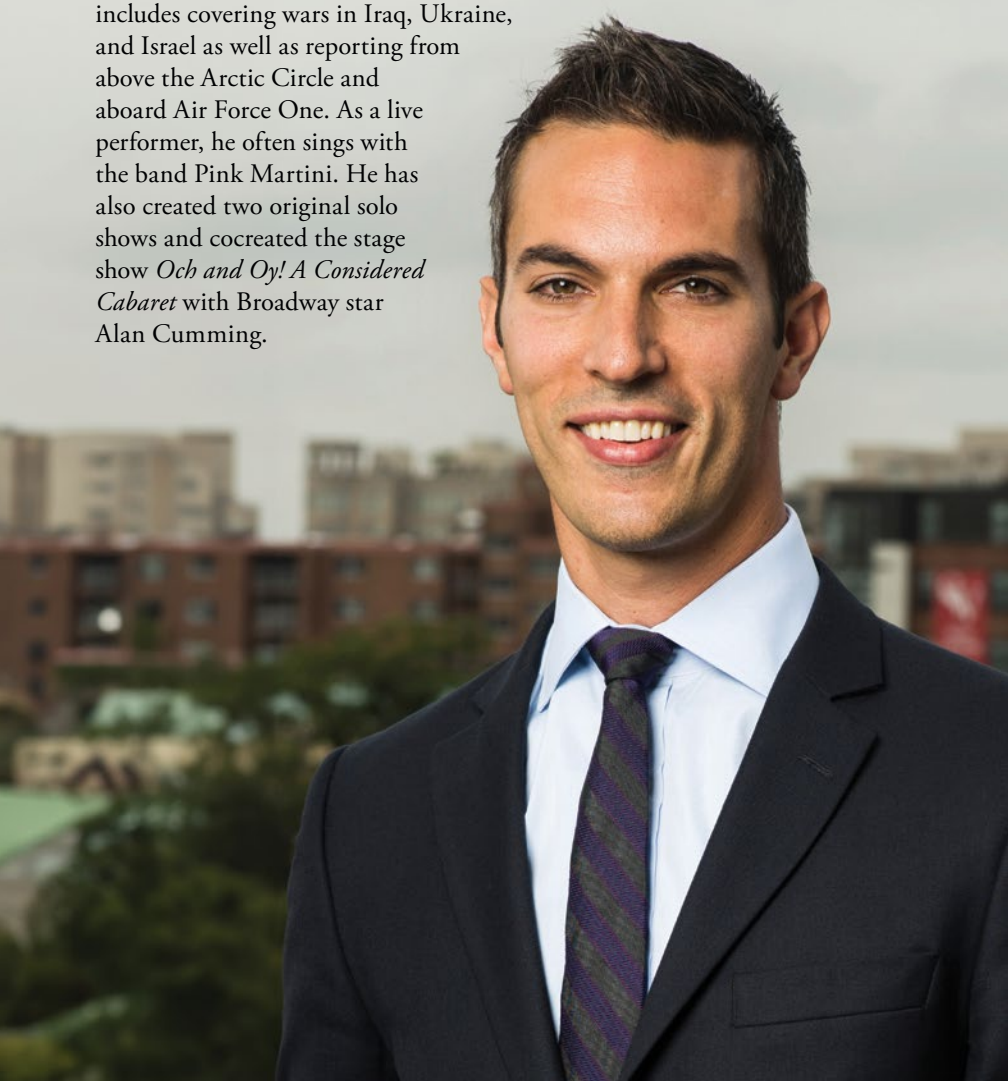

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Why Storytelling Matters

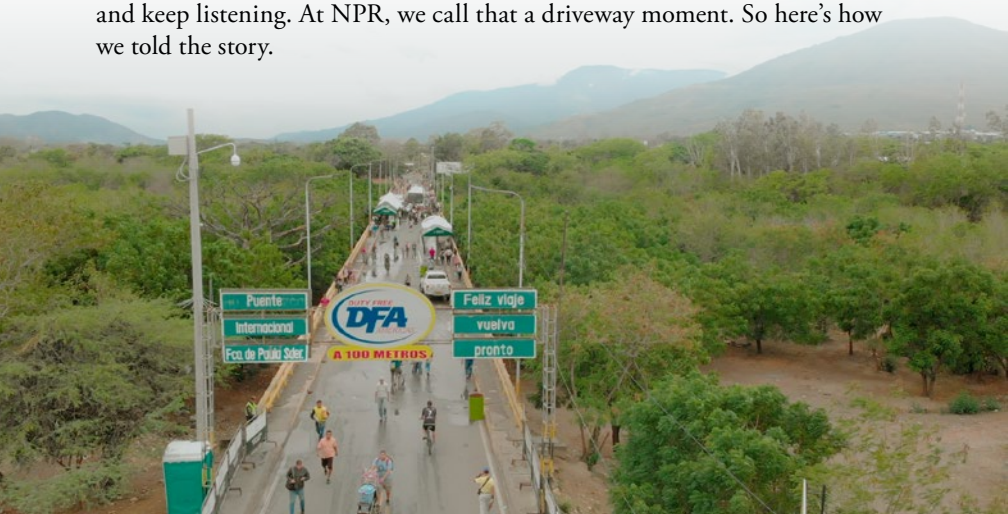
Telling stories is one of the most fundamental qualities that makes us human. In the chaos and disorder of our lives, stories have always given us a path. They help us filter out noise and discern meaning. They allow us to understand ourselves and help us look at life through the eyes of others. The best stories have the same qualities, whether they're fiction or nonfiction: They seize our interest and take us somewhere, introduce us to people we'll never forget, and leave us seeing the world a bit differently than when we began. But how do you make a story do that? In this series, we're going to dig way into that subject—from how to find a good story, to choosing your characters, to structuring the story, to conducting interviews, to delivering a story effectively out loud, and lots more. For starters, I want to get you thinking about the act of storytelling by walking you through a story I did that called on just about all my storytelling skills. It's a story about Venezuelan migrants that became an 11-and-a-half-minute audio documentary for National Public Radio (NPR).

Capturing the Story of Venezuelan Migrants

Panic was rising in Venezuela. It was 2019, and the country's economy was imploding. Inflation was pushing prices up so quickly that people would negotiate the cost of a meal before they sat down to eat, because by the time they finished, the value of their money would have dropped. Shelves were empty. Even basic essentials like medicine were unavailable. And so, desperate to provide for themselves and their loved ones, millions of Venezuelans were flooding into neighboring Colombia.

As a radio journalist, I wanted to bring their situation home to American listeners. But there had already been many news stories about migrants that year. I needed to find a way to make this one stand out. To make matters more complicated, it was too dangerous to go to Venezuela. Street gangs would rob anyone, especially a team of Western reporters. So the question I faced was, How do I tell this story?

I believed it was an important story to tell, and not just because Venezuela was in a state of crisis. It showed how badly an authoritarian government such as Venezuela's could mismanage a country. And it was a chilling reminder of how much can go wrong in any country when its economy falters. I wanted people to care about this story so much that even if they pulled into the driveway at home while we were in the middle of it, they would stay in the car and keep listening. At NPR, we call that a driveway moment. So here's how we told the story.



Engaging the Audience's Senses

Since going to Venezuela seemed too risky, we went instead to Colombia, where the people fleeing Venezuela's economic meltdown were headed. One of my producers, Matt Ozug, suggested we follow the 350-mile route from the border town of Cúcuta to Colombia's capital city, Bogotá. This was a route that people of all ages and physical conditions were actually traveling on foot. They were called *los caminantes*, "the hikers."

To convey the situation facing the migrants from the very start, I introduced the story by asking my cohost, Audie Cornish, to take out her phone. I told her to pull up Google Maps and map the route from the city of Cúcuta on the border to the city of Bogotá 350 miles away. She told me it was about a 12-hour drive. Then I said, "Now map a walking route between those two cities." And she reported what the app said: "Can't find a way there. Try again."

What I was trying to do, in a relatable, tangible way, was to demonstrate that you are about to take a trip nobody should ever take. It's going to lead you through mountains, along narrow, twisty highways with no shoulder and sheer cliff drop-offs, where 18-wheeler trucks barrel past. You're going to be walking with elderly people and pregnant women. In other words, you are undertaking a difficult, dangerous, and very long journey.

And notice how I've begun addressing you directly: "It's going to lead you through mountains." "You are going to be walking with elderly people." I told this whole story in the second person. I wanted to put listeners in the center of the action. So I decided to do it literally, by writing the listeners into the story as though they were each making the journey themselves.

I also tried to engage the listeners' senses. For example, our story begins in a river—rushing water along the border dividing Venezuela from Colombia. You can hear the sound of the people splashing through. And to give the story greater immediacy, I don't tell it as if I'm back at my office relating what I saw earlier. Instead, I use my real-time narration that I recorded when I was standing there on the border, experiencing it all in the moment. I say, "I can see a train of people carrying all of their belongings in overstuffed bags, the beginning of this long journey."

My goal was to help people see what I was seeing, even in the audio-only medium of radio. It's a medium that allows people to engage their minds as active listeners in a story, filling in the details with their own imaginations. As you can probably tell, all these choices I was making involved putting myself in the shoes of the audience, thinking about what would make the clearest and strongest impression on them. That's a critical element of good storytelling, whether you can observe people reacting to your story as you tell it or, as in my case, you can't.

> ***I told this whole story in the second person. I wanted to put listeners in the center of the action.***

A critical part of storytelling is approaching the story with your full self because it's the only way to fully empathize with whomever your story is about, and it's what will make your stories unique.

Creating Empathy and Setting the Pace

It's also important to empathize with the people whose story you are telling—to try to understand what they must be going through and find a way to relate it to your listeners so that it resonates with them. Now, when you're walking 350 miles, it's essential to get into a rhythm. But if you're creating an audio documentary about that same 350-mile journey, a rhythm can be your enemy. You don't want to lull people to sleep. You want to keep them enthralled. And so, I consciously varied the pacing of the story.

That wasn't just for the sake of novelty. I knew that if I was going to hit the audience with the emotional gut punches that the caminantes were enduring, I was going to need to slow down sometimes to let people absorb what they had just heard. If you pack too many emotional moments too closely together in a story, you can numb your listeners instead of moving them. I also wanted to give the audience not just the big picture of the story but also a sense of how exhausting and wrenching the trek felt at the personal level to the people who were making it.

> ***All these choices I was making involved putting myself in the shoes of the audience, thinking about what would make the clearest and strongest impression on them. That's a critical element of good storytelling.***

So, having described the mass of humanity that was embarking on the journey, I took listeners to a small roadside stand. There, hanging from the ceiling, were what at first looked like flags but were actually hundreds of handwritten notes left by caminantes. I asked some people whom I found at the stand to read some of those messages—in Spanish and in English. And I created this sonic tapestry of snippets of the messages. "Beautiful mother, it hurt me so much to separate from you" segued into "This is the first day of the journey," which led to "I'm doing this for my kids and my family." I thought about painters who use pointillism—making small dots of color that, when you step back, create a lush, complex image on the canvas. Each one of those voices was like a little dot of paint to illustrate the story.

Striking Balances in Perspectives

Now, the story of the caminantes was dark and painful. It included a lot of suffering, and that can be difficult for an audience to listen to. But there was hope in the middle of that suffering, and I wanted people to feel that as well. So, I looked for a helper and found one in Señora Marta Alarcon. She was the woman who ran the roadside stand where all the notes were hanging from the ceiling. Her shop was little more than a convenience store, but she had turned it into a makeshift shelter for the people passing through. She gave people a place to stay, helped them on their journey. And for listeners, she offered a reason to stay hopeful, a reason to keep listening, a reason to believe that the world is not only suffering. The suffering is real but so is the opportunity to do good in the world.

Señora Alarcon told me that when she talks to the caminantes, she encourages them to focus not on what they left behind but rather on how the life they are going to will be better. At that point in the story, I said, "The road is dotted with makeshift refuges like this convenience store—places where someone saw a need and stepped up." I very deliberately put that line in general terms, "places where someone saw a need and stepped up," because this is something any one of us can relate to—something any one of us can do. I assumed that not many people listening to my story owned a convenience store along a route where millions of migrants were escaping on foot from a collapsing country. But how many people listening to my story lived in a place where they might see a need and step up? Every single one of them.

Having shared this close-up look at life along the route, I zoomed back out to give people another big-picture perspective at the start of a new day in the journey. The next morning, I said, you climb into the mountains, and it's 30° colder than where you began the journey on the border of Venezuela. People are shivering in T-shirts. And then we zoom in again, on one young woman, Reina Ballestero. She's sitting on the stoop of a building in the town of Pamplona. And here, once more, I focus on small details. Someone has given her a light sweater to put over her tank top. Her feet are torn open with blisters.

> ***But there was hope amidst that suffering, and I wanted people to feel that as well.***

Reina tells me she lost all of her extra clothes and her ID when the river swept away her backpack as she was crossing the border. And yet she says, "I have to keep going because my nephew has leukemia, and I need to work to send him money." I ask her, "How will you keep moving forward when your feet are so broken?" And she replies, "However I can. If they stay torn up the way they are, I'll keep moving forward."

Next, we head to a section of the route known as La Nevera, "the refrigerator." It's the highest elevation of the entire journey—more than 10,000 feet above sea level. You're literally in the clouds, surrounded by rocks and scrubby bushes. Temperatures are often below freezing.

And there we meet a 19-year-old named Angelis Mendez, traveling with 10 family members, including her infant son. She describes the threat of the cold, telling me one of the most disturbing things we've heard in our entire journey. She says, "We've heard so many stories about kids who parents have held close, and they thought that they were alive, and then they found out that they were dead."

Now I have to pull back the curtain here for a moment. Because as reporters, we had been hearing these stories about La Nevera, but we were not able to confirm them. We could not report that infants had died in this part of the journey because we didn't know whether it was true. But the fact that a 19-year-old mother was hearing these rumors as she walked through this harrowing stretch with her baby—we thought that was a compelling detail. It helped put our listeners in the minds of the people on this journey, afraid for their children's lives.

Still another way we put listeners in the caminantes' position was by confronting the audience with some of the same agonizing choices that the caminantes had to make. We did that at Bucaramanga—the first big city the caminantes encountered on their journey.

Here's how I described the situation there:

> The good news—Bucaramanga is home to half a million people. So some Venezuelans can find work here. Bad news—there's not a single shelter in the city. If you don't have money, your best bet is to sleep in a park. So you can see, there's a fork in the road here.

I wanted listeners to imagine themselves facing the caminantes' dilemma: Do I stay in Bucaramanga and find work or keep walking? Do I spend what little money I have on a place to stay, or do I risk sleeping in a park, given the dangers of sleeping outdoors in a big city? By making the experience personal, I wanted to help listeners think of the caminantes not as foreign migrants but as fellow human beings.

At this stage of the story, I wanted to offer the voice of someone authoritative—not just someone on the journey but a source who could speak with a broad perspective about the challenges that the caminantes were facing. It's a standard practice in journalism, and I could have easily called an expert on South

America at one of the many think tanks around Washington DC, where I'm based. But in this story, I thought that would have been terrible. We had been taking listeners on a journey—painting pictures with sound—creating an experience that they had been living through.

Can you imagine if, after all that, I said, "According to Venezuela expert so-and-so at such-and-such policy institute, this is a pivotal moment in the migration crisis"? My instincts said, "Absolutely not!" It would have broken the personal connection that I'd worked hard to create between the listener and the story. In this context, that seemed like journalistic malpractice.

So instead, I looked for an expert in the context of the journey. And I found a doctor who had been providing free medical care to the caminantes in the city of Bucaramanga. Better yet, he was Venezuelan himself. He was one of those migrants who decided to stay in the city and find work. And so he could give me a perspective that was medical and human, professional and empathetic.

He described the terrible toll the journey was taking on migrants' feet, especially the migrants who had no shoes. But he added, "For me, it's very hard to tell someone not to continue on that path. Each of them has a dream of providing a better life to their unborn babies, to their families."

Closing the Story

By this point, I knew I needed to bring the story to a close—yet I was feeling no sense of closure. The conditions in Venezuela were only getting worse, and the stream of migrants fleeing to Colombia was only getting longer. What kind of conclusion could I offer the audience?

> ***I hoped that the way I concluded it would help listeners understand that they weren't just witnessing an event—they were catching a snapshot of something that had been going on for some time already and was unlikely to end anytime soon.***

I decided to seek out people who had settled near Bucaramanga, where I had interviewed the doctor, to get their perspective on the journey they had made. So I take our listeners to a small farm in an area that grows coffee and orchids.

A Venezuelan couple in their early 20s is living there with their two young children. The parents have been working on the farm for 4 months. And so they have had time to reflect on their journey. They're more contemplative than anyone I've met so far.

The mother, Jennifer Guanipa, tells me she knows more people who have left Venezuela than people who are still there. "Everyone who can walk leaves," she says. "Anyone who has feet leaves."

I ask what she'll tell her son when he's old enough to understand. She says,

> We're going to tell him that he was born in Venezuela but we had to bring him here. And that, God willing, we'll be able to go back sometime and his grandmother will still be alive, because he really loves her.

To me, that seemed as personal and intimate a final thought as I was likely to find. But I chose to end by zooming out once again so listeners could fully appreciate the harsh reality of the migrants' situation. I wanted the audience to realize that, for all the trauma they had just heard about along the caminantes' route, they were still nowhere near the true end of this journey. I said,

> If you still want to reach Bogotá, you have another 200 miles to go. You may go even farther. Venezuelans are walking all the way to Ecuador or Peru, hundreds of miles past Bogotá. The life you knew in Venezuela has disappeared. And the only thing you know for certain is that unless the crisis in Venezuela ends, more caminantes will be coming behind you.

And with that, the story was over.

I hoped that the way I concluded it would help listeners understand that they weren't just witnessing an event—they were catching a snapshot of something that had been going on for some time already and was unlikely to end anytime soon.

Stories are about more than information. They are an opportunity to foster understanding and to open someone's eyes to someone else's outlook. That's why, whether you're a journalist or some other kind of storyteller, thinking deeply about storytelling and working to make your stories come alive for the audience is so worthwhile.

Reading

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What Makes a Story Work?

So, how do you succeed at storytelling? What does that even mean? The difference between a story that succeeds and a story that fails is not only ambiguous—it is entirely subjective! Every day, I get tweets from people who loved a story of mine and tweets from people who hated a story of mine. They are talking about the exact same story. That's just how storytelling works. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Little Women* are both considered great works of fiction. And it's perfectly fine to love one and hate the other. No story will thrill everyone, but we can learn some things from stories that thrill many people. And even though the rules of storytelling are meant to be broken, it's helpful to know what rules other storytellers have established or followed. So in this lesson, I'm going to break down for you one of my stories that apparently worked, at least for some listeners—in that it won a prize. This is not intended as a bragging session! But studying prizewinning stories can be helpful because the organizations that award the prizes explain, at least in general terms, the qualities in a story that they think are worth honoring. And since the story is my own, I can also tell you why I put it together the way I did.

As you begin a storytelling project, ask yourself a few questions:

- What's your superpower?
- Where do you have insights that others might lack?
- Where are you willing to go that others may not?
- How can your experience, history, and identity serve your storytelling project?

Creating a Portrait of Breonna Taylor

Breonna Taylor was the emergency medical technician who was killed in her apartment in 2020 by police executing a no-knock search warrant in Louisville, Kentucky. Her death helped spark a national movement for social change and racial justice.

Do you remember how the summer of 2020 felt? I'm guessing most of us will never forget it. If you took the threat of COVID-19 seriously, you probably had not been out of your house much in months—unless you were an essential worker like Breonna.

People were afraid of catching the coronavirus and dying. Vaccines were not available yet. Maybe your kids were struggling with remote schooling, or your loved ones were getting sick. We were staring at our screens for hours every day.

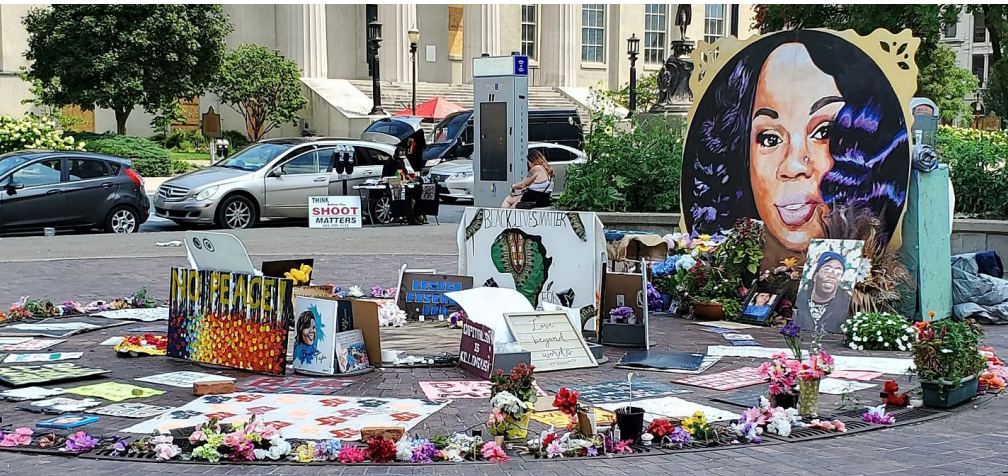
That February, as the pandemic was just beginning, Ahmaud Arbery was shot to death. He was a young Black man who had been jogging through a residential neighborhood in Brunswick, Georgia. And just 3 weeks later, in the middle of the night in Louisville, police burst into an apartment and shot and killed Breonna Taylor and injured her boyfriend.

And only a couple of months after that, in late May, those screens we were glued to showed us video of a police officer killing George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by kneeling on his neck for almost 10 minutes as he begged for air.

Breonna's death did not immediately become a rallying cry. It took time for people to learn the story. But her boyfriend, who survived, told people what happened. And by June, people all over the world were marching in the streets to protest these killings. One of the chants was "Say her name: Breonna Taylor!"

So much frustration and anger seemed to boil over that summer. Even before the tragic deaths, I had been feeling near the end of my rope. As a host of *All Things Considered*, I had been used to traveling about once a month to report a story—but since the start of the pandemic, I had been cooped up like everyone else. By the time my editors asked if I would go to Louisville for the Breonna Taylor story with a producer named Becky Sullivan, I had not been outside of Washington DC in months.

I was desperately eager to go—and also a little afraid. Would I catch COVID? What if I made a family that was already grieving sick with a fatal illness? And on a deeper level—was it even appropriate for me, a privileged white guy, to parachute into a town and hoover up a community's pain to serve to the public in the form of a radio story? But above all, I was wrestling with how to tell that story.



Starting from Empathy

By June 2020, the issue of how Black people were being treated in the United States and beyond was something everyone was talking about. Reporters from almost every major national news organization were telling stories about the events surrounding Breonna's death. It was a crowded space in which to try to find something original to say.

My editors didn't give me a specific story assignment when they sent us to Louisville, but my instinct was to try to get closer to the story than others had. How do you do that? It's about building trust with your sources. It's about meeting people where they are and bringing your humanity and openness to the process of storytelling. It's about coming in neither as a cold, dispassionate narrator nor as someone who is taking sides, but as someone who is willing to approach the people involved with empathy for their points of view and for what they have experienced.

Not all stories are written with empathy. Some stories are mocking, cruel, outrageous, or designed to provoke. Political attack ads are a version of storytelling. They are designed to make you see someone as an enemy. That is the opposite of building empathy.

And political attack ads "work" in the sense that they persuade voters to do what the people who make the ads want them to do. But to make stories of the kind that I tell "work," you need empathy. And frankly, that kind of storytelling is much more in line with my value system.

> ***My instinct was to try to get closer to the story than others had. How do you do that? It's about building trust with your sources. It's about meeting people where they are and bringing your humanity and openness to the process of storytelling.***

So, when I considered how best to approach the story of Breonna Taylor's death, I decided that I wanted to introduce our audience to who she was before she became a headline or a hashtag.

The piece that we produced ultimately won the Edward R. Murrow Award for hard news reporting, which is given for stories that "exemplify the importance and impact of journalism as a service to the community." And I believe it was the empathy we put into it that made it work.

Building Trust

The first meeting we had when we arrived in Louisville was with the lawyer who represented Breonna's family, Lonita Baker. We sat down with her in her law office and recorded an interview. And then we stopped the recording and just chatted.

I knew that our goal was ultimately to have sit-down conversations with the people who knew Breonna Taylor best. But I also knew that we had to approach that mission with humility and treat the people involved with respect—like human beings, not means to an end.

So, after Lonita Baker had gotten to know me and Becky and our conversation was wrapping up, I said, "I understand what a difficult time this is for the family. We would really like to tell this story. Do you think they might agree to talk with us?" She said, "I'll ask them. Give me a call later tonight and I'll have an answer for you."

Well, it took some doing, but eventually a group of Breonna's aunts and uncles agreed to gather in one of their backyards and reminisce with us. We recorded them. And after we had spoken with them and gained their trust, we asked if they'd connect us with some of Breonna's friends. And they put us in touch with her two best friends, who also agreed to sit down and speak with us.

Empathy was not only important in gaining access to the people we spoke to for the story—it was also central to how we conducted the conversations. We took pains not to make ourselves the center of attention in an emotional situation in which we essentially were intruders. Instead, we tried to almost fade into the background.

I wanted to give these people who knew Breonna Taylor best an opportunity to reminisce with each other about her. And I told them that when we showed up. I said, "Look, I have plenty of questions that I could ask you. But most of all, I just want to give you a chance to share your memories. So feel free to talk with each other, tell any stories you want to tell, and I'm happy to just listen." And I said, "I want to paint a complete picture of Breonna. So any small details, any funny anecdotes, I'm here for all of it."

Have you ever been to a funeral where people laugh so hard they start to cry? That was the feeling of these conversations. Breonna's aunts and uncles actually made fun of her whiny voice. They did impressions of her! Her friends talked about how she could never stay awake through a movie. They told me that she would sing at the top of her lungs even though she couldn't carry a tune. And they said something similar about her cooking—she loved to do it, but she was not a great cook.

Landing on Something Genuine

When I finished all those interviews, Becky and I sat down in my hotel room to write this story. In the first draft, I put in all of those funny, slightly rude moments. And I turned to Becky and said, "Does this go too far? Is this description of Breonna Taylor a little too unvarnished?"

And we both realized that there was no clear, correct answer. When you get to this stage of a complex story, you have to follow your gut, talk the issues through together, or maybe ask for an additional opinion from an editor. You could try it different ways: Write a few versions and see which one lands right. And ultimately, you make a judgment call and hope for the best.

In this case, we decided to put it all in there. I wanted this portrait to feel definitive. I wanted someone listening to the story to feel like they really got to know this person whose name they knew well but whom they had never met in real life and never would.

Another reason we left it all in there was because, thanks to our decision to let everyone talk freely with each other instead of just to me, it felt genuine. It was what we in the radio business call great tape. You heard people laughing and crying at the same time. You heard people talking over each other and finishing each other's sentences. You were invited into a private, intimate space and given a deep view of somebody's life. You know how the best desserts are not just one-note sweet—like they have a little bit of tartness or saltiness to set off the sugar? Well, I think a story, especially a sad one, can be made the same way.

> ***I think that the moments of laughter, of levity, of humanity that we wove into our story gave listeners a new perspective on the tragic realities that we also addressed and made them all the more powerful and disturbing.***

Those moments of humor, of surprise, of delight, are worth including—even if they seem incongruous—because they keep the story moving in unexpected directions and keep the audience engaged. And above all, they make the story more convincing because they make it multidimensional—and life is multidimensional.

I think that the moments of laughter, of levity, of humanity that we wove into our story gave listeners a new perspective on the tragic realities that we also addressed and made them all the more powerful and disturbing. It's sort of like the painting technique of chiaroscuro—where you juxtapose light and dark to create a more striking and memorable image.

Closing the Story

I was particularly proud of the way we ended that story. We'd spent so much time in these intimate spaces with Breonna's family and friends—after which we heard her friend Erinicka show me a scrapbook with photos of the two of them together.

Then I said, in narration: "Across town, there's another image of Breonna. It's a portrait drawn in chalk at the center of the protest in downtown Louisville. People gather in a circle around it, chanting." And then we heard that familiar refrain: "Say her name: Breonna Taylor! Say her name: Breonna Taylor!"

And so we went from personal to public, from intimate to communal. It's another kind of juxtaposition that sets what came before it into starker relief.

The story then returned for a moment to her friend, who said this: "She always said that she would be a legend. I just never imagined that it would be like this."

And then this was the final paragraph of the story:

> Tomorrow would have been Breonna Taylor's 27th birthday. Her family and friends are going to get together for a barbecue. And then on Saturday, hundreds of people, maybe thousands, will gather for a larger birthday celebration here in Louisville, releasing balloons and butterflies in memory of this woman they never met.

We went from personal to public, from intimate to communal. It's another kind of juxtaposition that sets what came before it into starker relief.

The idea is that we come back to the world we recognize—the one we know—and after the journey we've been on, we see it through new eyes. I think it's the openness and honesty of Breonna's family and friends in the story that make that new outlook possible. Without approaching the story empathetically, I don't think we could have ever captured that.

Telling a compelling story is not like following a treasure map to a spot where you dig until you strike gold. The journey is going to be different every time for every person. And leaning into the differences can be the secret to making your story stand out from the pack.

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Finding the Story

Before you can decide how you're going to tell a story, you need a story to tell. And my advice on how to find a story includes good news and bad news. The good news is you can literally start anywhere and find your way. The bad news is you can literally start anywhere. And it can be hard to run a race when you don't know where the starting line is. In this lesson, I share some of my methods for finding stories, including a few I used when I was in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia.

Start Anywhere

When I'm looking for a story, I sometimes think of the old parable about three blind people touching an elephant. They've never seen an elephant before. One touches the trunk and concludes that the creature is like a snake. Another touches the leg and concludes that it's like a tree trunk. The third touches the tail and says to the other two, "No, you're both wrong; it's like a rope." If you're waiting for a punchline, sorry, there is none. And no fourth person comes along to explain things to the others.

In and of itself, it's not much of a story. But I think people typically share this parable to convey a few different lessons: Don't rely too heavily on your first impression, understand that subjective experience can be true and also misleading, and recognize that when we fail to consider the perspectives of others, we can be led astray. And of course, those are legitimate conclusions.

But I take away a different lesson from the parable: It doesn't matter whether you begin by touching the tail, the trunk, or the leg. Keep going. Eventually, you'll work your way around to the entire elephant. By the time you're done, you'll have an understanding of the thing.

And here's the most important part: At the end of this process, it won't matter whether you first laid hands on the leg, the tail, or the trunk. That's what I mean when I say, "How do you find a story? Start anywhere."

Many people seem to think that you have to begin your search for a story like a spider at the center of a web of ideas or facts and work your way outward. And that's at least one approach to deciding how to tell your story.

We'll talk about storytelling structure in another lesson. But when it comes to finding your story, you don't know where the center of the web is. So putting pressure on yourself to start there can be paralyzing. Just start on any strand and map it out.

What does that look like in practice? Well, if you write fiction, you might find that initial strand or idea anywhere: in a conversation you've had, in something you've experienced or read, or even in one of your dreams. If you're a journalist, though, you need to find your story in the real world, and you may be asked to find one about a particular subject. You may also have a deadline. So you can start anywhere so long as you're on the right web, but you can't necessarily afford to take your time.

Talk to Experts

To get some quick orientation, journalists often begin by calling experts. For example, if I notice a wave of union organizing across the country and I want to tell a story about what's going on and why, maybe I begin with a call to the AFL-CIO for a background conversation. Maybe I begin with a call to the organizer at the Amazon warehouse on New York's Staten Island that was the first in the company to form a union. Maybe I call a professor who studies the history of labor. Here's the important thing: Those are all correct answers. In

all likelihood, before I make any decisions about the story I'm going to tell, I will talk to all three of them. So don't overthink; just reach out to someone who knows more than you do and ask some questions.

To give you another metaphor for finding a story, it's a bit like being dropped into a dark cave with a flashlight. You might only be able to illuminate a few steps in front of you. But if you take a few steps in this direction and then a few steps in another direction, with time, you eventually learn the layout of the cave.

When you're in any of these exploratory conversations and you're coming to the end, there are two questions that are really important to ask:

- Who else would you recommend I talk to about this?
- Whom do you respect who disagrees with you on this? That is, who do you think could help me understand other points of view on the subject?

Don't overthink; just reach out to someone who knows more than you do and ask some questions.

Think about it—all of these people exist in an ecosystem of knowledge. They interact with each other. They spar with each other. They read each other's writings. You, as the storyteller, are the one coming in without a map. And each conversation you have is helping you draw that map. So take every opportunity to gather information from knowledgeable people who can help you make that map complete.

Despite what your mother may have told you, talk to strangers. Strike up conversation, and get into the world of the people around you. If conversation doesn't come naturally to you, push yourself. The more you do it, the more natural it will become.

On Assignment in Sarajevo

Talking to experts can only get you so far, though. Sometimes the ecosystem that they exist in excludes some important perspectives. In June 2014, I was sent to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, to report on the 100th anniversary of the assassination that touched off World War I. This was when a young Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

I am not a World War I historian. I had also never been to Sarajevo before. Naturally, I talked to some people and did some background reading, so I had a basic understanding of the place and what happened there. But that didn't tell me how or where to start building an engaging story in modern-day Sarajevo about an event that happened there 100 years ago.

When I arrived in the city, I still had no answer to that question. But I ended up producing not just one but five stories in the space of a weekend about the anniversary. And they're stories that I'm proud of. I'm not going to tell you about all five, but let me share with you some of the methods I used to find a few of them—fundamental methods that you can apply when you're looking for your own stories.

Use Your Senses

The first method is to use your senses. Look around you. Listen. Inhale. No matter what story you were assigned or what kind of story you think you are looking for, when you get out in the field, observe what's actually happening around you.

It may give you a way in to your story that you never could have thought of—or it may alert you to a story you hadn't thought of telling. When I got to Sarajevo, the first thing I noticed was that I wasn't the only one marking the anniversary. There were signs and banners all over the city. International conferences and art exhibitions were taking place. There were TV camera crews on the street corner where the assassination happened. The world had converged on Sarajevo for the occasion.

So, what did I do? I went to Sarajevo's bustling central market, called Markale. Why? For one thing, I love farmers' markets. But also, I knew that if I wanted to find an interesting new angle on what had happened in Sarajevo 100 years ago, I wouldn't uncover it in a crowd of journalists from other parts of the world.

Like I said, when you're looking for a story, you can start almost anywhere. So why not get away from the pack and start someplace you want to go to anyway? When I got to the market, I found myself surrounded by fascinating sights, sounds, and smells. There were tiny wild strawberries, homemade cheese flavored with roasted peppers, and garlands of dried okra they call Bosnian Viagra. It felt like an old-fashioned traditional way of life.

But as I began to talk with people there, I learned that many of them did not choose this lifestyle. One woman told me that she used to work in a bank and was reduced to selling produce. Another man told me that he was an auto mechanic by trade, but there were no jobs in that field. He said, "What I'm doing right now," selling fruit, "I'd never choose to do it in my life."

Now you might be thinking, What exactly does any of that have to do with the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I? Fair question. Talking to these people, I learned that they were frustrated not only with their own government and the politicians who were supposed to be representing them but also with the international attention that their city was suddenly getting for something that happened a century ago.

See, earlier in the year, thousands of people had marched in the streets of Sarajevo demanding reform. The protests became so intense people actually set fire to the president's mansion. "Where were the international TV crews then?" people asked me.

> ***Use your senses and your head. Avoid obvious storylines and look for what's really going on around you.***

A few months after those protests, historic floods wiped away entire neighborhoods of Sarajevo. Bosnians were furious at how little their own government did to respond and how little the international community seemed to care. So now, with every hotel in town booked to capacity and the world's attention focused on Sarajevo, the local people I met said it was a travesty. We are in free fall, they said, and the international community is here celebrating something that has nothing to do with our daily lives.

This was a story I could never have planned to do when I got the assignment to visit Sarajevo. It was just one that took shape as I talked to people, asked questions, and found my way around. So use your senses and your head. Avoid obvious storylines and look for what's really going on around you.

Don't feel as though you need to find your stories entirely on your own. Other people can be extremely useful to you in your search. Seek them out, find out what they can tell you, and ask them who else they know who might be able to help. You'll be amazed at what they can do for you.

Find Something Unusual

Here's a second basic approach I used while hunting for stories in Sarajevo: Look for what seems strange, unusual, or out of place. Pay attention to questions that nag you about what you're seeing. And if the answers don't become clear quickly, that's a sign they may be worth hunting down.

I came across one such strange thing when I visited a museum on the street corner where the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand was killed. The museum had only one room, but I asked the tour guide there to show me around.

He pointed to a black-and-white photo. It showed a pillar that used to stand outside the building we were in. This pillar was a monument related to the assassination, but it had a very short life. Construction started in 1916. It was finished in 1917. And the monument was destroyed in 1918. I thought, That's odd; maybe there's a story there. It was like picking up a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I couldn't help but wonder what the whole picture looked like.

So I started looking for more puzzle pieces. I began to ask, Who really was Gavrilo Princip, the assassin, and how did his plot unfold? As it turns out, Princip was a scrawny, malnourished kid, just 19 years old. And tragic as it was, the assassination had all the elements of a farce.

Princip didn't act alone. He was part of a gang of assassins who were well armed and had planned out their attack as a blow against Austria-Hungary, which had recently annexed their country. The problem was they were almost comically incompetent. Franz Ferdinand could hardly have been a more vulnerable target.

On June 28, 1914, he and his wife were scheduled to ride in a triumphal parade through Sarajevo, after which the archduke was to give a speech. The route of the parade had been published in advance. There was minimal security. The archduke and his wife were even riding in an open, roofless car.

Nevertheless, when their big moment arrived, two of the assassins completely chickened out. Another threw a bomb at the archduke's car but missed, injuring an official in the car behind it. Then, the bomb thrower swallowed poison and jumped off a bridge into a river, which was 6 inches deep, so he just broke his leg. He also survived the poison and was captured.

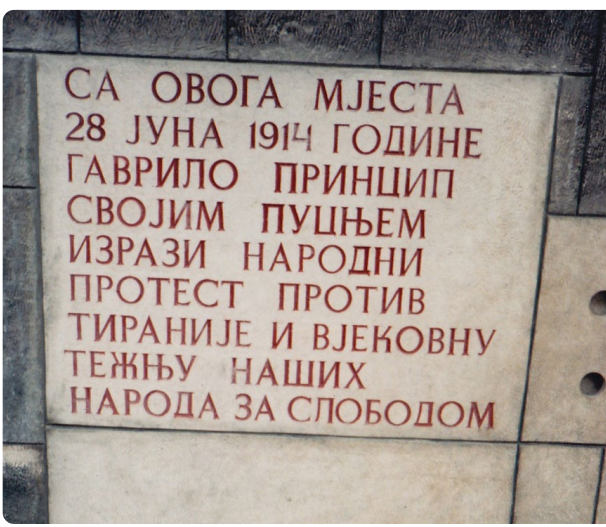
Meanwhile, the archduke rolled on unscathed, reached his destination, and gave his speech. The plot seemed to have failed completely. But on the way back, though, the archduke's motorcade made a wrong turn and came to a halt right in front of Gavrilo Princip. Princip was literally about 4 feet away from the car. He took two shots. One hit the archduke. One hit his wife. Both were fatal.

Then, Princip tried to shoot himself, but onlookers grabbed him first. Both Princip and his bomb-throwing accomplice were convicted and would later die in prison of tuberculosis. So how did Sarajevans think of Princip? I wondered. Was he a hero? A villain?

As I looked at more photos at the museum exhibit and then dug deeper, the answer seemed to depend on who was doing the storytelling and when. The pillar at the assassination site turned out to have been not in honor of the assassination but in memory of Franz Ferdinand and his wife. It was erected by the Austrians during World War I. But after the Austrians wound up on the losing side of that war, the victors took it down.

In 1930, when Bosnia was part of Yugoslavia, a plaque went up saying that what Gavrilo Princip did in Sarajevo "heralded freedom," portraying him as a hero. Then, Hitler's army invaded during World War II and removed the plaque. Freedom for Bosnia wasn't really their thing.

When that war ended and the partisans retook Sarajevo, another plaque went up. It honored Princip and his comrades for combatting "the Germanic conquerors," making a literal reference to the First World War while clearly invoking the Second.



For a while, there were footprints in the sidewalk where tourists could stand in Princip's shoes. Those were torn out during the Balkan wars in the 1990s when Bosnians were fighting each other.

I found that in every era, people used Gavrilo Princip as a metaphor to represent whatever ideas they held themselves. I even found a Hollywood movie from 1975 called *The Day That Shook the World*, where Princip was portrayed as a smoldering heartthrob. I put an audio clip from that into my story.

To put this all in perspective, I spoke with someone who could reflect on Princip as more than just a symbol. I found a man named Haris Pasovic, whose grandfather was a teenager working in the family shop in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. Pasovic's grandfather heard the gunshots that killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. Yet Pasovic told me that his grandfather might have only mentioned the incident once, in passing.

For people in Sarajevo, he said, the assassination simply was not a big deal. Politicians around the world, though, know a powerful tool when they see one. So the last line of my story was, "For the last 100 years, Gavrilo Princip has been a more potent symbol in death than he ever was in life." If the photo of a long-lost monument hadn't stuck in my mind and made me wonder, I might never have found that story at all.

There are two other points about finding a story that I want to leave you with. First, think about your audience and what is important for them to hear. Thinking about your audience will guide you to meaningful stories and will also help tell you figure out what to include in your story and what you can leave out.

> ***If the photo of a long-lost monument hadn't stuck in my mind and made me wonder, I might never have found that story at all.***

Second, pay attention to your own motivations as a storyteller. Respect them and let them guide you to the story. There's no right answer. It's about observing with your own unique powers of perception and relating with your own unique abilities to connect. You follow your curiosity and your sense of what is important. You keep your senses on high alert. You learn and experience new things. And then you share that with others to help them see the world in a new way.

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4

On Interviews, Conversation, and Silence

Every radio story I've ever told has included a conversation. Sometimes it's a live conversation on the air. Sometimes the conversation was recorded out in the field as part of a reporting project. Sometimes conversations that I have with people never make it into the story that airs at all—but they're still an important part of it. They give me valuable information that I use as I'm hunting facts down or putting elements together. Whatever kind of storytelling you do, or want to do, honing your ability to talk with people can come in handy. And thinking about the way dialogue works—how it flows—can be important for both fiction and nonfiction storytelling.

Set Your Guest at Ease

One good rule of thumb for conversation, at least if you're hoping to have a friendly one with someone, is to put them at ease from the outset. If you can help people relax, they are much more likely to open up. People who come in for an NPR interview almost always arrive with talking points. I want them to forget those talking points or at least set them aside. I want them to just have a conversation with me.

In the summer of 2022, I interviewed an author named Jamil Jan Kochai. He had just released a collection of short stories called *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*. And when our segment aired on *All Things Considered*, he tweeted about it, saying that my presence had helped him get over his nervousness. That was really kind of him.

The truth is that all I really did to relax him was chat before the interview. I told him I'd read a short story in *The New Yorker*, which was how I found out about his book; it was the sort of thing I'd say to him if I met him at a cocktail party—not the stuff of an interview at all. But it ultimately made the interview better because he was more at ease.

> ***People who come in for an NPR interview almost always arrive with talking points. I want them to forget those talking points or at least set them aside. I want them to just have a conversation with me.***

There's a key moment before we start any NPR interview. We have the guest on the line—usually they're in a different studio, though sometimes we're in the same room. We haven't started recording yet, and we need to get a voice level to make sure they aren't too loud or too quiet—to make sure their mic is in the right place. Basically, we just need the guest to talk. It doesn't matter what they say. Just please don't ask them to count to 10. At best, it makes them feel bored and their mind wanders. At worst, if they're already nervous, a countdown makes them feel like something is about to explode.

The thing I do most often these days is ask them something about themselves that I've been curious about but that I'm not planning to cover in the interview. Like when I interviewed the author Jennifer Egan about her novel *Manhattan Beach*, I was curious about a major plot twist—how she decided where to put it in the story. And I knew I wasn't going to ask that question in the interview. It would have been a spoiler. But I also knew that if I asked her before we started recording—instead of asking what she had for breakfast, or another common question to ask someone—it would send a few subtle messages. One was that I read the book! That's important. It's a way of showing respect for the author's work and letting them know that I'm fully present and made the effort to prepare.

Asking that question about the plot twist before we started recording was also a way of conveying that I was really interested in the conversation we were about to have, so much so that I wanted to ask about the book even if it wasn't directly serving the interview that we were about to record for listeners.

I know that for most authors, talking to NPR is a high-stakes thing. I've seen lots of independent bookstores with a prominent section labeled, "I heard it on NPR." So of course someone is going to be nervous before an interview on *All Things Considered*. But by talking with Jamil Jan Kochai about reading his short story in *The New Yorker* and with Jennifer Egan about the plot twist in her novel, I reframed the conversation we were about to have.

It wasn't, "Look how lucky you are to be on my program." It was, "Look how lucky I am to be able to talk with you about this book that I'm excited about." They know that this isn't just me reading off a producer's notes. I'm not having this conversation because I'm checking one more box off my to-do list. I'm as engaged in this as they are.

Really listening is the most important part of any conversation.

The most common mistake that I see young journalists make is to destroy any rapport they've established with the guest by marching through their list of questions in order, regardless of the answers they get in response.

Use Flattery and Gratitude with Sincerity

Sometimes I'll even go so far as to say, "You know, in the middle of all the bad news in the world, it's really nice to have a conversation about something like your project." Flattery is totally OK as long as it's sincere and you don't go overboard.

Sincerity tends to encourage sincerity in others. And that's a great basis for a conversation.

In fact, I purposefully made use of flattery to create one of my favorite recurring segments we've ever done on *All Things Considered*. It got artists to open up in a way that they rarely did in other interviews. This is a music series called *Play It Forward*. It's structured as a musical chain of gratitude. In each episode, a musician tells me about their own art and then about someone whose work they are thankful for. We encourage guests to choose someone of a different gender, genre, or generation, so each link in the chain builds unexpected bridges and takes listeners to surprising places.

I created this segment for Thanksgiving one year. We aired it as a 30-minute musical chain connecting five guests to one another. And it was such a hit that we did it the next Thanksgiving. We did that for 5 years. Then, we spun it off into a stand-alone segment that ran year-round. Every few weeks, we aired an installment where each segment was one link in the chain.

So for example, in one episode, the soul-baring young rapper Leikeli47 explained why she was grateful for jazz legend Chick Corea. She told me, "I always said, 'If I could do with my voice what he does on the keys, who's stopping me?'"

In another episode, Tony nominee and Broadway icon Shoshana Bean explained how listening to R & B superstar Brian McKnight taught her how to riff. She said, "No one was moving or singing R & B like that. And his album came out, and I just rewound and rewound and rewound those riffs."

And I always end my conversation with these grateful artists in the same way. I say, "Alright, Leikeli47, we're going to go to Chick Corea next [or whoever comes next]. What do you want to say to them?" And they thank the person whose work inspired them. Then comes the important part.

After the episode featuring Leikeli47, I spoke to Chick Corea, who has since passed away. After Shoshana Bean, I went to Brian McKnight. And the secret of the series that listeners don't know—because they hear an edited version of the conversation—is this: The segment that airs on the radio is 8 minutes long, but I talk to each artist for maybe half an hour. And when we begin to record one of the artists who has been thanked, the first thing I do is say, "We're going to start by playing what Shoshana or Leikeli47 [or whoever] said about you. So just sit back and listen for a few minutes." And then we play that tribute, the expression of gratitude, for the guest in its entirety, unedited, beginning to end.

And we're rolling on the guest's reactions. So we hear them say, "Oh, wow." Or sometimes they get teary-eyed. And as they listen to a fellow musician talk about what their art has meant—the impact their music has had—it's like you can hear our guest's walls—their defenses, their talking points—just dissolve.

For example, here's what Leikeli47 said to Chick Corea, whom she had never met before.

> Sir, there's a lot that I could say to you, but nothing beats "thank you" at this moment right now. You have helped shape a little Black girl from Virginia—you know, her mind, her creativity, her musical palette. Thank you for being an awesome teacher. From your student, Leikeli47.

So, you play that for a guest before you start talking to them. And then your mics are open, and you begin with, "What's your reaction to that?" or "What are you feeling right now?" And what amazes me is that no matter how famous or how successful the artist is—no matter how many awards they've gotten in their career—it never fails to affect them.

When I played Shoshana Bean's words of praise for Brian McKnight, he said:

> I think you very rarely get to hear what impression you've made on people. And they can tell you how much they're appreciative of what you do. But when you're standing in front of them, it's different than when they have an opportunity to speak about you when you're not there.

That's what I mean about sincere flattery being an effective tool. Sincerity tends to encourage sincerity in others. And that's a great basis for a conversation.

Some of the best questions you can ask include the following:

- Really?
- How so?
- What makes you say that?
- Why do you feel that way?
- Tell me more.
- Give me an example.

What do all of those questions have in common? You cannot plan them in advance. They can only come from listening and responding in real time.

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5

Choosing Your Characters

Think about the stories that you have connected to most strongly in your life. They might be *Peter Pan*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Hunger Games*. What do you remember most about them? The setting, the action, the dialogue, and the plot, sure, but none of those things would hold together without compelling characters. So in this lesson, we're going to talk about how to find and choose characters for the story you want to tell. Before we do that, though, I think it's important to focus on what a character is and does.

Seeing Real People as Characters

When I sit down with an editor and a producer to plan out a news story and the people who will be included in it, *character* is actually the word we use. We talk about who our main character or other characters will be. Sometimes we refer to the main character as our protagonist. Even though we're sitting in a newsroom, we use the same terminology we would if we were writing a novel or a short story because these characters will ultimately serve the same function that Peter Pan would in his story or Romeo and Juliet in theirs. They create an opening for empathy, for understanding, and for making sense of the world.

I will admit that I feel a little bit of uneasiness when I talk about people in that way, because of course when I tell stories in journalism, the characters whose experiences I am recounting are not inventions of my imagination. They're real people. The folks who appear in my stories live complex and nuanced lives that stretch beyond the beginning and end of a simple reporter piece.

To whittle the totality of their existence down to a 15-second quote or something as two-dimensional as the word *character* can sometimes feel like I'm doing an injustice to the reality of their existence, like I'm oversimplifying or caricaturing them. But choosing characters is a necessary part of telling any story, including a news story.

I discussed this issue a few years ago with the brilliant author and journalist Lulu Miller. She was one of the creators and hosts of the podcast *Invisibilia*, and she went on to be a host of the show *Radiolab*. Her book *Why Fish Don't Exist* was one of my favorite reads of 2020. It's a combination memoir and biography, telling Lulu's life story alongside the story of a scientist named David Starr Jordan.

Jordan, who is a complex character himself, spent his life categorizing—trying to impose order on chaos. Specifically, he identified and labeled new species of fish. In the book, he turns out to be a really bad guy. I don't want to give away too much of the plot. But one of the things that Lulu Miller does so beautifully is she shows that as tempting as it is to impose order on the world—to say, "These things, they're all rays; those things, they're all sharks; and these are all fish"—that can be a dangerous seduction.

Here's an idea for you as you're considering a main character or characters for your story: They don't have to be people. Animals aren't off limits. I mean, consider *Charlotte's Web* or *Dumbo* or the *Lion King*.

But something else, such as a place, can be as important a character as any person. Like in *Sex and the City*, the city of New York was as crucial a character as Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda, or Samantha. If *Breaking Bad* were set anywhere other than the Arizona desert, it would have been an entirely different show.

When you put something in a box, you risk snapping off the little filaments and ornaments that might make it otherwise not fit in the box. And once you have a box for each thing, what do you do with the platypus or the seahorse, which seem to defy categories?

Yet in order to get through life every day, we constantly have to do this. We group, categorize, generalize, and assume. It is the only way to make sense of the world. Applying this process to people is challenging and fraught with danger because there's a constant risk of stereotyping and discriminating.

But if we didn't have categories and boxes, we would never be able to make a decision about anything. As journalists and as storytellers, part of our mission is to help make the world understandable for our audience. We find order and narrative and stories that will help people find a path. To do that, we need characters who will lead us down the path. And often those characters—in one way or another—represent something. They are symbols of something larger than themselves. Let's look at some examples.

Presenting Characters as Symbols

Example 1: The price of gas has been going up. I'll introduce you to a grandmother in rural America who used to drive an hour to the grocery store once a week. Now, because she can no longer afford the gas money, she goes once every two weeks. In real life, that grandmother may be many things: a veteran, a poker player, a Sagittarius. In my story, though, that grandmother is a symbol. She is there to represent the impact of rising gas prices. She makes the abstract real.

Example 2: At a hospital, you hear the exhaustion in a nurse's voice as she describes caring for dying people during the worst of the COVID pandemic. In that story, the million small things that make that nurse a unique human being get left outside the story's frame. For us, she is a symbol of burnout and suffering among health-care workers. Her individual experience helps turn a big, intangible thing into something comprehensible and relatable.

Example 3: At a political rally, someone explains why they showed up to cheer for their candidate. The story about the rally might include only a 10-second clip of that person. We might not get to know much about them at all. But they have become a symbol of the politician's base. Someone who wonders why anyone supports that politician can listen to the story and hear from someone who does—someone who answers that question.

In a different story, I might follow that person through their lives, spend a day with them, paint a nuanced and comprehensive picture of what makes them who they are—but not in this story. And there is nothing inherently wrong with whittling down a person's complicated, singular identity in that way if you do it openly and with integrity.

When I go to interview the grandmother, or the nurse, or the supporter at a political rally, I am transparent with them and with the audience about what I'm doing. It is an implicit—sometimes even explicit—agreement between me and the person I'm talking to.

Before we start recording, I will say, "I'm doing a story about this political candidate [or about health-care workers' burnout or about gas prices]. Would you be willing to talk with me about it?" And so everybody is on the same page before we start. They know I'm not suddenly going to ask about student loan debt or immigration.

Of course, I still need to be careful about how I portray each person's views so I don't misrepresent their experience or what they believe. The more prominently you plan to feature someone in your story, the more important your selection becomes.

Choosing Your Main Character

So let's talk about how to choose your main character, which can be especially challenging when you're faced with a crowd of potential protagonists. Finding your protagonist is a little bit of art and a little bit of science.

One good rule of thumb is this: If you want to spend time with someone, it's a good bet that your audience will too. I'll give you a specific example. In 2008, I was in Houston covering Hurricane Ike. The storm took out power across a huge chunk of America's fourth-largest city. And I woke up one morning to the news that the first Home Depot was reopening in the city.

It was still early in the morning when I showed up. It was already hot. And there was a line of people stretching all the way across the enormous parking lot. Any one of them could have been the main character in the story that I was going to tell.

So I started going down the line and asking folks, "What are you here to buy?" For me, this was part looking for people to talk to and part just trying to figure out what the story was. Some folks didn't want to talk to me—fine, cross them off the list. The ones who did want to talk all answered my question the same way: generator.

A police officer was guarding the line to keep order. People were only being allowed into the Home Depot one at a time, escorted by a store employee. And as I went down the line, I met two women who I could immediately tell had a rapport with each other. It turned out they were mother and adult daughter: Evelyn Al-Dubais and her mom, Linda Coen.

When I asked why they wanted the generator, they told me a really intense story. Linda's 50-year-old adult son, Mike, uses a machine to help him breathe. They said when the power went out in the storm, he started gasping for breath. They put him in the car and drove around during the hurricane with the windows down just so he could have fresh air coming through. They told me they thought he was going to die. Eventually, they found a hotel room. They couldn't afford it, but they had no choice because they needed electricity for the breathing machine.

Now, standing in line outside the Home Depot, they said they were hoping that they wouldn't have to pay for another night at the hotel—hoping the store didn't run out of generators before they reached the front of the line. They told me they couldn't even really afford the generator. The cheapest models cost $600. The daughter, Evelyn, said yeah, she was worried about the bills, but "you can't get blood out of a turnip."

> ***There was something that made you want to root for them, to spend time with them, to get to know them. So that's the first thing they had: relatability. They also had a second thing that makes for a compelling protagonist: They were in a high-stakes situation.***

And then her mother, Linda, said, "Y'know, mothers worry more. That's what we are, worriers." This emotional story just poured out of them, each of them finishing the other's sentences. And again, there's something that feels a little craven about putting it this way, but I knew I had found my protagonists. They were deeply relatable people. They had love. They had history. They had humor. We can all connect with that rapport.

I don't know if you've ever seen the documentary *Grey Gardens* from 1975. It is a movie I've watched probably more times than any other in my life. It's about a mother and her adult daughter, who go by Big Edie and Little Edie. They live in a squalid, sprawling, run-down mansion in East Hampton, New York, called Grey Gardens. It's full of cats and raccoons. And the movie is about a lot of things. But to me, more than anything else, it's about the relationship between parent and child. You just can't stop watching them.

Evelyn and Linda reminded me of Big and Little Edie. Despite their struggles—or maybe even because of their struggles—there was something that made you want to root for them, to spend time with them, to get to know them. So that's the first thing they had: relatability.

But they also had a second thing that makes for a compelling protagonist: They were in a high-stakes situation. Everybody in that line wanted a generator. But they needed a generator. Linda's son's life depended on it. And so for basically those two reasons, I decided to spend the day following them.

We waited in line together in the heat, then went into the Home Depot. A man with a forklift was driving around stacks of generators. The rule was one per family—to prevent people from buying a lot and reselling them for a jacked-up price. And when we got the generator, I realized that this quest had just begun.

To make it work, they needed gas, and so I drove around with them for an hour. Every gas station was closed. Without gas, they had a $600 paperweight in the trunk of their car. Finally, we found an open gas station.

And like the Home Depot, the line stretched on endlessly. While we were waiting in that line, Linda said something that I think of as the key moment of this story: "You don't realize the necessity of water, lights, things you take for granted, until you can't have them." That's the moment that this personal individual story about these two women, about Houston, about a natural disaster, became a universal story.

It wasn't just, "Oh, look at those poor tragic people whose lives are so different from mine." We all depend on water, lights, gasoline, and power. And so in that moment, I think anyone listening would say, "Oh, that could be me. There but for the grace of God go I—go any of us."

In any story, with any character, you're looking for that moment—when your audience can have that flash of empathy, of connection. As I drove around town with Linda and Evelyn, I came to another realization about them as characters. I realized that their story followed a basic structure that we're all familiar with. It was the quest narrative.

You could think of the story I wound up telling as the *Odyssey* meets *Grey Gardens*. These people went from one challenge to the next to the next until finally the story ended with the roar of the generator coming to life, which was so satisfying because we had been through all of these challenges along with these two women who we'd gotten to know so well.

> ***Linda said something that I think of as the key moment of this story: "You don't realize the necessity of water, lights, things you take for granted, until you can't have them." That's the moment that this personal individual story about these two women, about Houston, about a natural disaster, became a universal story.***

Using Archetypal Characters

Whether it is intentional or subconscious, I find when I'm choosing characters for my stories that I'm often drawn to archetypes—like the *Odyssey*. And I know that I'm not alone in this. Years ago, I asked the author Salman Rushdie about writing archetypal characters. After all, he wrote a novel called *Quichotte*, based on Don Quixote.

The novel I was talking to him about was *The Golden House*. In it, there's a king in a castle with three sons and a wicked stepmother character, and there's a curse on the family. It all feels very ancient and familiar—like stuff from a fairy tale.

So I said to Rushdie,

> When you take a step back and observe that the novel you've written follows an archetype, do you think to yourself, Oh how lovely, I'm part of this ancient tradition? Or do you think, Oh damn, I'm telling the same story humans have been telling themselves for millennia?

And he replied,

> We all tell each other the same stories all the time. The question is whether you tell the story in a new way. It's like writing a song. Everyone has the same set of notes to play with. What makes music beautiful is the way you arrange those notes and how you play or sing them.

So, when you are looking for characters in your stories, don't run away from archetypes. Lean into them. If I realize that my protagonist reminds me of King Lear or Cinderella, I don't think, "Whoops, better find someone new!" It's exactly the opposite, in fact. There is a reason humans have been telling each other the same kinds of stories for millennia. These familiar characters have a deep pull on our psyche, and that's something that we can tap into as storytellers.

It doesn't matter how old or familiar or well-worn a story might be. If you find the right characters, you can make people so riveted that they can't turn away.

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6

Building Your Story

The thing I love most about my job is that every story is different. But there is one part of my work that I have to admit I hate, and I face it with every single story. There will be a moment when I've done all the research, conducted all the interviews, gone through the transcripts and chosen the best quotes, and listed out the scenes and characters. And after all of that work and preparation, I face a blank page. Even after more than 20 years, I still wonder whether I will be able to hack a trail through the underbrush. When you're facing that blank page, how do you get started, and how do you build your story from there? That's what we're going to be talking about in this lesson. Of course, there's no one answer. But over the years, I've built up a tool kit of techniques that I fall back on.

> ***What is the single most compelling thing you have? Put that first. Then ask, What follows naturally after that?***

Starting from a Blank Page

One of the simplest techniques is to phone someone I know. I will call up my spouse, an editor, or a friend, and I will tell them the story. I won't look at my notes or my transcripts. I'll just talk: I saw this, I did that, someone told me the most surprising thing, this one person I met was remarkable, and ultimately, I was left with the impression that. You get the idea.

If it's helpful, you can actually record a voice memo of yourself having that conversation. But I find that the conversation alone helps me figure out how to tell the story, because in a way, by the time it's over, I've already told the story.

Another benefit of this technique is that it gives you an early sense of where the weaknesses in your storytelling might be. If there's a part where your friend or spouse or editor says, "Hold on, that didn't make sense to me," or you reach the end and they say, "What happened to that person you told me about at the beginning?" that's really useful information that can help you structure your story more effectively.

Another technique I often use to get past the blank page and move beyond is to choose the best piece of tape or the best quote. What is the single most compelling thing you have? Put that first, then ask, What follows naturally after that?

Back in 2005, as I've mentioned previously, I was covering the Justice Department for NPR. It was my job to report on court cases and legal affairs. And I heard about a really interesting story. Federal prosecutors had brought a case in rural Mississippi under the Voting Rights Act. Of course, that had happened many times before. What made this a great story—what made this a historic lawsuit—was that it was the first time in history the Voting Rights Act had been used against Black elected officials, accusing them of discriminating against white voters.

This was during the George W. Bush administration. The Justice Department was already getting criticized for its shabby record of civil rights enforcement. And so here was one of the rare instances when it did enforce a civil rights law—but it used the act in a majority-Black county to protect white voters who were in the minority.

I learned about this because I sat through a long, boring congressional hearing, and hours into it, one of the witnesses mentioned this case. My ears perked up. Nobody had reported on this lawsuit. So I bought a plane ticket to Jackson, drove hours to Noxubee County, and spent a week in rural Mississippi right near the border with Alabama.

It was a fascinating place. And at the end of the week, I had so much material, I didn't know where to start. So I decided to lead with the best little nugget of sound that I'd found. It was of a local blues singer named Willie King. He had a song called "Pickens County Payback." Pickens was right next to Noxubee County, where prosecutors had brought this case. And the song told of some ways Black people in the South had been wronged and how they would turn the tables once they were in the majority. It was a classic blues sound that just pulled you right into the story. How could anybody hear it and not stick around to find out what came next?

And so, once I placed that at the start of the piece, I thought, What follows logically from here? Well, I had a librarian, a white woman, saying, in effect, "Yeah, what he describes in that song about payback? That's what we're seeing here in this community."

And the rest of the story fell together much more easily after that. Now, just because you start the writing process by putting the best thing you have at the top, that doesn't mean it has to stay there when you get your story into its final form. But at least it gets rid of that dreaded blank screen so you can get to work.

I often tell producers and editors that I work with that I would so much rather have something bad that I can improve on than nothing at all. Just write and get something down on the page, and we can worry later about whether it's good or not.

> ***Just because you start the writing process by putting the best thing you have at the top, that doesn't mean it has to stay there when you get your story into its final form.***

Developing the Story

Of course, getting started isn't the whole battle. It doesn't tell you where your story is going and how to get there, beginning to end. But if you can figure out what your next step is, and the step after that, and the step after that, you'll get there eventually. So that's another approach to building your story: just going step-by-step.

Another useful one is to create an entire outline of your story before you put it together. Sketch out the whole story arc from beginning to end before you dig into the details at all. I find that this is especially helpful for projects that are so big and unwieldy it can be hard to keep everything organized in your mind. Sometimes I make flash cards with scenes and characters, and I arrange and rearrange them on a table until I find a satisfying order.

In 2009, I went to Suffolk County, Long Island, to report on the anniversary of the death of a migrant from Ecuador. His name was Marcelo Lucero, and he had been murdered. The defendants in the case were a gang of teenagers who said that, on the night of the murder, they had set out to bash

immigrants. A group of people gathered for a vigil in Lucero's memory to try to bring the community together. My producer and I wanted to understand how immigration had affected the community. So we interviewed community activists and experts, we attended the memorial vigil, we visited a food distribution site for anyone who was hungry, including immigrants, and when we finished our reporting, we had to figure out how to organize all the material we'd gathered.

> ***If you can figure out what your next step is, and the step after that, and the step after that, you'll get there eventually.***

I remember before we returned to Washington DC, we got breakfast at a place in Brooklyn. And sitting at a table with our coffee and eggs, we listed out every person, every scene, every interview, every big idea we'd gathered in our reporting. Then, we shuffled the pieces around like a deck of cards. And by doing that, we realized we actually had two related stories. So we ended up creating a two-part series. Part one was about how a sudden increase in immigrants had changed this community. Part two was about the relationship between police and civilians as the number of hate crimes against Latinos increased.

Choosing What to Leave Out

Now, making these structural decisions about your story often forces you to do something that can feel really unpleasant: choosing what to leave out. I've heard it referred to as "killing your darlings," "killing puppies," or, even worse, "killing babies."

> ***With every decision you make, you have to ask, "What serves the story best?" because that is what will serve the audience best.***

Anybody familiar with storytelling will recognize this experience. You've written a draft of the story and you realize that something you love is sitting on the outside looking in. Sometimes you try to shoehorn it into the story, and you realize, nope, it doesn't fit.

Or maybe you think you've got the whole narrative in great shape and you're just running through it one more time, and you suddenly realize that your favorite moment is actually a speed bump. That's when you have to kill your darlings.

Sometimes the part that it hurts to lose isn't even your favorite; it's just something you had to work so hard to get that you can't stand to think all that work was for nothing. Sometimes it's one of your characters—someone you would feel terrible about leaving out.

I once said to a colleague, "It is the worst feeling to cut someone from a piece who has given you their time, who you worked hard to interview, who you know will be disappointed not to be in the final story." And he wisely replied, "Yeah, that is a terrible feeling. You know what feels even worse? Inflicting them on the audience when it doesn't serve the story you're trying to tell."

Ultimately, that's the most important consideration in building your story. With every decision you make, you have to ask, "What serves the story best?" because that is what will serve the audience best.

Choosing a Structure

OK, so we've talked about how to get past the dreaded blank page and some basic approaches to getting the writing process underway. But organizing your material can be daunting. And the truth is you don't need to invent a structure for your story from scratch. There are what you might call templates to build a story, at least as a starting point.

These are traditional structures or approaches that can work in a wide variety of situations. You can literally keep a list of them handy and, for any given story, ask which of them will work best in this scenario. So, let me give you a few of them.

Chronological

The simplest approach is to tell a story chronologically. You start with once upon a time and end with happily ever after. And in between, you put what happened first, second, third, and last. This gives you an opportunity to build suspense. You keep the audience wondering what happened next.

There's a variation on this template that can work really well sometimes, which is to start a story at the end, then jump back in time to explain how we got there. In the movie *The Hangover*, from 2009, these guys who've gone to Vegas for a bachelor party wake up in a hotel suite. One of them is missing a tooth. There's a baby in the closet. And there's a tiger. One of their friends is missing. And the whole movie is basically an answer to the question, How did we get here?

This is also a technique I used for a chapter in my memoir, *The Best Strangers in the World*, which I'll talk more about later in this course. I started the chapter with my wedding, then I jumped back in time to when I came out in high school and when I met my husband in college, and finally I worked back to the marriage scene that started the chapter.

Sometimes I will repurpose what had been the beginning of a story to make it the ending instead.

Two Sides

Another template that I often use is presenting a story from two perspectives. We've all heard that there are two sides to every story. Why not use it to your advantage? I've found the "two sides" template especially useful when I'm reporting on court cases.

You spend the first half of the story explaining the argument that the defense team makes and the second half explaining the perspective of the prosecution. Or you alternate between one side of the argument and the other throughout the story, point/counterpoint style.

Now, there is a common pitfall with the "two sides" template that you'll want to avoid: false equivalences. You don't want to spend half the story explaining the cataclysm of climate change and the other half explaining why some people think global warming is a hoax.

Similarly, if half the story says there is no widespread election fraud in the US and the other half says "but maybe the election was stolen" without providing evidence, you are not doing your audience a service because, factually, the opposing views in those stories don't deserve equal weight. Ultimately, the "two sides of every story" structure works only if it illuminates, not obfuscates.

Expanding Circles

Still another story structure that I keep in my deck is one I call expanding circles. In 2019, there was a federal government shutdown—the longest in US history. I wanted to find a town that was really feeling the pain of the shutdown directly. So I went to Oakdale, Louisiana.

The two biggest employers there were the federal prison and the federal immigration detention center. And by the time I arrived, nobody at either facility had been paid in more than a month. So I started that story with a husband and wife who worked at the prison. They described trying to raise three girls with no money coming in. They had no money for gas or groceries. But they were both still working at the prison full time.

Then, we moved outward a ring to a shop called Canal Coffee. The owner, Roderick James, called himself the coffee man. He wasn't a federal employee. But none of his usual customers were coming in to buy coffee because they weren't making any money. So his income had dried up, too.

The owner of the barbershop was sitting at the counter of Canal Coffee. He had no customers for haircuts. And the next ring out from there was the Burger Inn—a hangout in the center of town that had been around for decades. It was cutting employees' hours because nobody was coming in to buy burgers.

The final ring in this expanding circle was the Oakdale mayor. He told me that water bills are what fund the city's operations. And nobody was paying them, so the city couldn't do basic maintenance tasks. So it was like tracing ripples in a pond as they radiated out from where the pebble first fell into the water.

I prefer to end a story by looking ahead and opening a door rather than closing it.

Different Perspectives

I'll give you one more story structure to keep in your arsenal: different perspectives on the same event. The classic Kurosawa film *Rashomon* is a perfect example of this. Four different people recall different versions of the same story. Booker Prize–winning author Marlon James is doing an entire trilogy of novels based on this approach. It has been described as an African *Game of Thrones*. In it, he has created a bloody, sexy universe full of adventures and monsters from African mythology.

Each novel explores the same story from a different perspective. And one of the things I love about this approach to storytelling is captured in the first sentence of the first book, which is called *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. The book is basically about the search for a missing child.

And the first chapter begins, "The child is dead. There is nothing left to know." I love the chutzpah of starting a sprawling trilogy with those two sentences. Because first of all, if you know the child is dead, what is the point of this search? You're about to find out.

And second of all, that sentence "There is nothing left to know" almost feels like a dare, because if there were really nothing left to know, we would close the book there on page one. But the statement makes us curious to know what James isn't telling us.

I interviewed Marlon James about this novel, and he told me,

> I've always been more interested in whydunits than whodunits. I find whodunits frustrating. Because I usually figure it out by the 10th page. But whydunits, it's a bigger question. It's a more involved question.

He said,

> I don't want to know that you got a divorce. I want to know why your marriage fell apart. That's the question that leads to the longer and more complicated answer. "Why" cannot be answered with a one-word answer.

So James's trilogy becomes less about solving a mystery and more about perspective and the slippery nature of truth.

As you consider all of these different ways you might structure a story, it's important to keep in mind a principle that I've mentioned before. There is never only one right answer. Part of the fun of storytelling is that there are many different paths you can take.

There is one story ending that news editors will chastise you for using. It's a cliche phrase that is so hackneyed and overused that it's become a newsroom joke. The line is "Only time will tell." It's a shrug—a way of passing the buck.

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7

Telling a Big Story by Telling a Small One

Every morning, the staff of *All Things Considered* gathers for our daily editorial meeting. And almost always, the meeting starts with some version of the same question: How do we want to address the biggest story in the news today? The story is often enormous—a war, a pandemic, or a political or economic development affecting the entire country or many countries. So there are inevitably lots of different ways we might approach it for our audience. In my experience, one of the most effective ways to approach a massive, sprawling story is to zoom in on one small part of the experience that represents something bigger than itself. So that's what we're going to talk about in this lesson. It's an approach that you can use in your own storytelling. And once you become more aware of this technique, you will notice it everywhere. But there are some stories that are so big and complex that finding a small story to use in telling them can be especially challenging. So let's look at some ways of approaching those.

Grasping the Magnitude of COVID

Big stories often involve big numbers: voter tallies, budget deficits, that sort of thing. So I often face the challenge of trying to tell a story involving a large number in a way that makes it understandable.

How do you help people grasp what it means for a piece of legislation to cost billions of dollars? The number is so big that it's beyond most people's experience. If it costs $2 billion versus $3 billion, what kind of difference does that make? Or if the economy just created thousands of new jobs, how do you help people understand what that looks like in real life?

> ***It occurred to me as I followed the coverage of the pandemic that whether you felt surrounded by death or untouched by it depended on some very specific factors; it had everything to do with the context you were in.***

One version of this challenge that I've faced again and again is helping people wrap their heads around the death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic as that number has relentlessly climbed. In April 2020, after only about a month of lockdown, the death toll from COVID-19 approached a number that felt unimaginable to me—50,000 people in the US. Of course, within a couple years, the number was more than a million. But at the time, 50,000 felt like a dizzying number. It is a dizzying number!

And so, my producers and I asked each other, "How do we convey what this number means?" There's a quote that's often attributed to Stalin, though there's no proof he ever actually said it: "One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic."

I didn't want 50,000 deaths to feel to people like just a statistic. So, as the country hit that 50,000, my producers and I decided to tell multiple stories scattered across the show in one day. See, it occurred to me as I followed the coverage of the pandemic that whether you felt surrounded by death or untouched by it depended on some very specific factors; it had everything to do with the context you were in.

And as I tried to break down what the most important factors were, I came up with four specific categories:

- Race: Black and Latino people were dying at much higher rates than white people.
- Occupation: Health-care and other frontline workers were far more likely to die of COVID than those of us who were able to work from home.
- Geography: Death rates were much higher in some parts of the country than others.
- Age: Senior citizens were dying at much higher rates than young folks.

As you hunt for a way to tell a story that seems overwhelmingly big, try to zero in on one person, one experience, one slice that can reflect the magnitude of the larger whole.

Painting a Broad Picture through Personal Stories

I recorded one conversation representing each of those specific categories. For race, I talked to the pastor of a Black church near Chicago. At the time, Black people represented 30% of Chicago's population and 56% of the city's COVID deaths. The Reverend Marshall Hatch told me what it felt like to be what he called a wounded healer, trying to console his congregation without the tools he normally uses, like a hug or handshake. They couldn't even hold funerals in person. And he told me, "The underlying narrative of American life is that Black life is worth less."

For occupation, I talked to nurses in Kansas City who were mourning a colleague who'd died of COVID. A CDC report at the time found that more than 1 in 10 deaths from COVID in the US were health-care workers.

So, in that story, the people I talked to painted a picture of their friend and coworker Celia Yap-Banago. She was the youngest of seven kids, who immigrated to the US from the Philippines in 1970. Her colleagues described her as a "little fireball" who always tried to make everyone else laugh.

For geography, I went to the hardest-hit borough of what at the time was the hardest-hit city in the US: Queens, New York. I spoke with the head of a housing co-op there about how the pandemic had decimated her neighborhood. She talked about losing people she'd been friends with for 35 years.

And for age, the CDC said about 80% of those who died of COVID were over age 65. So I spoke to a family that had lost all of their patriarchs to the disease. They were in Louisiana. And I asked LaTrenda Lee Jefferson what she would say to people who have not been as affected by the disease as her family. She told me, "I wish that people would take it seriously as the thought of people dying alone." She said, "I want to go back to work—my job has been furloughed—but not at the risk of my life or the lives of my loved ones."

So, collectively, these four narrowly focused, specific stories helped paint a broad picture of a much larger loss that could feel impossible to understand if you tried to get your arms around the whole thing. But of course, the nature of the pandemic is that we had to keep finding new ways to tell this story as the numbers kept growing and growing.

Storytelling through Memorials

In February 2021, the death toll was approaching half a million in the US. And once again, I got together with some producers and editors and said, "How are we going to tell the story this time?" Once again, we decided to tell a big story by telling a small story. But this was a different kind of small story.

Instead of focusing on individuals, I decided to ask the question, How will we memorialize the pandemic once it is in the past? I was thinking about how we, as humans, make meaning out of experiences. Because that's what we do as storytellers, right? We're trying to find ways to make meaning out of chaos. And in a way, that's what people who create memorials do, too. Except while we use words, they might use marble, granite, paint, concrete, fabric, and also words!

I gathered together an architect, a poet, and a man named Mike Smith. He was not a professional memorial-maker in the way the other two were. He was one of the founders of the AIDS Quilt. The memorial is a vast patchwork of nearly 50,000 brightly colored panels. Each one was made by someone who lost a loved one to AIDS.

The quilt was first displayed on the National Mall in Washington DC in 1987, when, at close to 2,000 panels, it was already bigger than a football field. As it has continued to grow in the years since, it has been shown around the US and in many countries abroad.

And the way Mike Smith talked about the power of the quilt gave me this "aha" moment. One reason the quilt worked to draw attention to the toll of the AIDS pandemic was that it was also a form of storytelling. And what each panel of the quilt was doing was exactly what we're talking about in this lesson. Any panel you looked at told a big story by telling a small story.

One panel might have contained a football. Another, a Mexican flag. They didn't try to capture the entire narrative of AIDS in America or even the entire life of the person being memorialized. Each one zoomed in on specific, memorable details to tell a story.

There is another thing that I loved about the way Mike Smith described the AIDS quilt. And that is that it was an act of collective storytelling. Unlike a monument in granite or marble, it was not designed by any one person. When I asked Mike Smith about the importance of that, here's what he said:

> Each panel may represent a life, but it really represents the relationship between that person and the person or group making it. And we wanted to tell those stories. You know, we needed a way to make it more about storytelling and less about history-writing.

I think that is such a powerful insight: "We needed a way to make it more about storytelling and less about history-writing." I think anyone using statistics to make a point—from journalists to historians to business executives to economists to members of Congress—would benefit from taking this advice seriously.

Charts and graphs that show the entirety of a massive global event can be useful. It is helpful to see the number of COVID cases as a series of bars getting higher and lower over time. It is useful to see a diagram of a battlefield to understand the way one army is driving back another. But I'm not likely to remember the bar graph or the map in the same way that I remember an individual story of what one person went through during the pandemic or on the battlefield.

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8

Storytelling and Trauma

My job often takes me to places where people have just experienced the worst day in their lives. I've covered mass shootings, natural disasters, global upheavals, and pandemics. And a key part of my work is to ask people who have experienced these traumatic things to recount them for me, if they are willing. Of course, that requires people to revisit these awful experiences. That can be profoundly upsetting and even harmful. Not only to the person telling the story but, to a lesser degree, the interviewer as well. So, in this lesson, I want to discuss how I and other reporters handle traumatic stories in the hope that it will help you in similar situations, whatever kind of stories you write.

Understanding the Nature of Trauma

One reason I think it's important to devote a lesson to this subject is that not everyone who tells stories of trauma looks out for their effects on the people who experience them. That might be a lack of awareness. But I've also seen situations where journalists behave in what seems to me to be an unethical way, where they in fact exacerbate the effects of trauma.

Before we dig in to how to tell stories about traumatic events in a constructive way, let's take a step back to consider the nature of trauma and what its impact can be. I want to be clear that I am not speaking as a psychologist or a medical expert here. I am not a therapist or a doctor, and what I want to tell you is not intended as medical advice.

I am offering it for the help it may provide you as a storyteller in case you find yourself dealing with traumatic events. It's based on my own experience and on some of the training I've gotten over the years.

A lot of that training comes from an organization called the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University School of Journalism, specifically from a psychologist named Dr. Katherine Porterfield. Many of the ideas I'm going to share I learned from her. But I'm speaking here for myself alone, and again, my goal is to help you tell stories effectively and responsibly, not make medical or therapeutic decisions.

So, what is trauma? We all have tools that we use every day to handle the routine stresses of life. Trauma is what happens when we encounter stressors that override those usual coping mechanisms. It forces our bodies to click into a different mode.

You've probably heard of the fight-or-flight response. It's an evolved, physiological reaction that occurs automatically in response to something we perceive as a threat. Our heart rate increases. Our lung capacity grows. We sweat. And those bodily reactions are involuntary.

But our bodies can't remain in that state of high activation forever. And so, after we've gone through something that forces our body to react with high activation, we might shut down. Our bodies demand rest. Our affect might be flat and emotionless.

If the trauma is ongoing—like poverty or an abusive relationship—the brain can actually release anesthetizing chemicals. In extreme cases, we might even dissociate, which is the brain's way of escaping when there is no escape. Our mind removes us from the experience, so it's almost like we aren't present or we're watching it from the outside.

Nevertheless, when someone lives through a traumatic experience, the trauma that the brain tried to escape gets encoded in memory along with the sensory experience of the event. And the fear reaction that the person had during the initial trauma is linked to that memory.

So when someone like a journalist comes along and asks them to recall the event, it can trigger the same kind of fear and distress that they felt when they first lived through it. That's why sometimes people want to avoid talking about what they went through. And when they do talk about it, you may see outward signs of that same fear reaction.

The reaction I'm talking about can actually manifest in two different directions: arousal or shutdown. Arousal can look like tears, sweat, heavy breathing, and shaking. In shutdown, someone might be listless, affectless, and showing little emotion. I've seen both of those reactions from survivors of trauma whom I've interviewed—people who seem panicked and frantic or people who seem dazed and detached.

As a journalist, it can feel uncomfortable to be in these situations, and it should: There is a genuine risk of re-traumatizing someone. So, how can we elicit stories in these situations in a way that is not re-traumatizing?

When someone like a journalist comes along and asks them to recall the event, it can trigger the same kind of fear and distress that they felt when they first lived through it.

Establishing Safety and Predictability

One key is to create safety and predictability. And I'm going to walk you through some specific steps I often rely on to help do that. Let's start with safety. Think about the physical space where you're having the conversation. Therapists put a lot of thought into how they arrange their surroundings: from the kind of seating to the temperature of the room to the art on the walls. My interviews aren't therapy sessions, and I often have limited control over where I conduct them. But being aware of the surroundings can make a big difference.

Just thinking about what will make the person most comfortable can be an important consideration. I have also asked the person I was interviewing, "Is this an OK setup?" I wanted them to have a sense of control.

And that leads me to the next consideration: predictability. Before an interview with someone who's gone through trauma, I will often say something along the lines of, "Here's how I thought we could use our time today." And then I will actually ask them permission: "How would that be?"

I will say,

> This isn't live. So if you want to pause or get a drink of water, that's fine. If you have any questions for me, feel free to ask. If you realize partway through an answer that you want to start over, you're welcome to do that.

I'm trying to lower the pressure and also let the person I'm interviewing know that they can call the shots. And that's an idea I return to again and again during the conversation.

Before I bring up a difficult topic, I might say, "Would it be OK if I ask you about that day? Are you comfortable talking about that experience?" In a way, it's talking about talking.

And then—as the conversation goes along—I will reflect what the person is saying back to them: "So what I hear you saying is … ." This helps me get more information and confirm my impressions. But it also helps the person I'm talking to feel heard.

> ***Before I bring up a difficult topic, I might say, "Would it be OK if I ask you about that day? Are you comfortable talking about that experience?"***

Sometimes what I'm reflecting back is not words but emotions: "I see you're looking down at your hands as you say this" or "It sounds like this is difficult to talk about." Often in these conversations, there are moments when I can see the fear reaction come back to the surface. And in those moments, I don't push for them to cry on tape. I intervene.

Here are some of the things I often say: "Let's take a minute. Do you want a drink of water? How are you doing?" Sometimes I just pause and take a breath and don't say anything and let them be. "I see this is difficult" is a phrase I often use, or "I don't want this experience to make things worse."

Now, I'm telling you about these situations as though everything is very organized and planned, which in an ideal world it would be. But the way things go in the field, it's often more chaotic and unpredictable than that. That's why you need to think about these issues in advance, so that you are ready, or as ready as you can be, to make decisions on the fly.

Covering the Pulse Nightclub Mass Shooting

One example that comes to mind is from the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in 2016. This was when a gunman killed 49 people and injured more than 50 at a gay club in Orlando. I flew to Florida hours after the massacre. And Sunday night, within 24 hours of the shooting, I went to look for people to interview at another gay bar called Parliament House.

That's where I met a young man named Julius Ortiz. He was wandering around with the shell-shocked look of someone who'd just walked off a battlefield. Remember I said that reactions to trauma can take the form of arousal or shutdown? This was shutdown. Partly because he'd been going all day and was utterly exhausted.

He told me that he'd been at Pulse Saturday night. He left the club at 2 am, just before the shooting started. His friends who were there started texting him as the gunman started to rampage through the club. And over the course of the day, Julius learned which of his friends were killed in the club.

So, by the time I met him at Parliament House, he had gone from intense fight-or-flight response to the flat affect that he had when I started our interview. Of course, when I first walked up to him, I knew none of this. It slowly came out over the course of my interview with him. And as he was telling me his story, I was adjusting my own approach, trying to incorporate some of what I've shared with you about how to talk to people who've lived through trauma.

Partway through the interview, Julius started to tell me about one of his friends who was killed that night, Luis Omar Ocasio-Campo. He went by Omar. He was 20 years old when he was killed.

I thought about the importance of making meaning out of these situations. The value of talking about things like this in spite of the risk of re-traumatization. I tried to imagine what Julius might need. And so I asked him, "Is there anything you'd like people to know about your friend?" Julius says, "When I was in a very hard situation with my dad—you know, I was staying with him and he kicked me out—he actually took me in for a little."

I wasn't sure I understood exactly what Julius was saying about Omar. So I clarified and reflected back, "He took you in when your dad kicked you out of the house?"

Julius said, "Yes."

And then there was a long pause.

I waited for Julius to say something more. He didn't. And then you hear me on tape literally thinking out loud, "I'm so sorry. Are you OK? I mean, no, how could you possibly be?"

There's another long pause.

And then I say, "Do you want me to stop recording?"

And Julius says, "Yes."

But after I stop recording, Julius continues talking. He says he hasn't shown this to anyone. And he pulls out his phone and shows me the text messages that he sent Omar all day. They get increasingly frantic hour after hour, only stopping when he learned that his friend was dead.

Now, I wish I could tell you that in that moment I was thinking carefully about how to do interviews with people who've experienced trauma. I wasn't. I was going by instinct. But in that case, my instincts were right. I reflected what he was saying back to him. I checked in with him and asked what he needed. When he told me what he needed—to stop recording—that's what I did.

Keep in mind that you don't necessarily get only one shot to talk to someone in a traumatic situation. And sometimes, giving them time to process what they have experienced can make for a deeper, more meaningful interview on another occasion.

There was another experience I had on that reporting trip, where I don't think I did exactly the right thing, and I want to tell you about it so you see how these things can happen. My producer, Jinae West, and I were reporting a story about the youngest victim of the massacre: an 18-year-old girl from Philadelphia named Akyra Murray. She had just graduated from high school. She was headed to college on a full scholarship, and her family took her to Orlando to celebrate.

Akyra went to the club with a friend and a cousin. Akyra was shot in the arm. She and her cousin hid in a bathroom stall. And during the hours that it took police to enter the scene, Akyra slowly bled to death.

So, under any circumstances, this was going to be a difficult and painful story to tell. Akyra's mother and the 18-year-old cousin who'd been in the bathroom stall with her agreed to talk with us.

Jinae and I drove to the rental condo near Disney World where the family had planned to spend this celebratory week. We did the interview in the living room. And Akyra's 4-year-old sister was there, too.

As we concluded the interview, I asked the mother how much her 4-year-old understood about what had happened. She said she understood a lot. The 4-year-old came over and sat in her mom's lap. I said to the mother, "Is it OK if I talk to her?" The mother said yes.

And I said to the little girl, "Can you tell us your favorite thing about your sister?" And the girl turned away from me and whispered in her mother's ear, "I miss Sissy." In hindsight, I wish I had had the contextual awareness to say this little kid does not need to be in my story. Involving the 4-year-old wasn't a violation of any rule. I had the mother's permission.

And I don't believe that my inclusion of her in the interview altered this child's life. But I'm not sure how much it added to the story. And in the context of an already traumatized family, where I'm trying to do as little additional harm as possible, I'm not sure it was worth the risk.

For some people, talking about an extreme event they've lived through would be reopening a wound that needs to heal. But in many cases, I have found that people actually want someone to listen to them; they want to share their story. And they want to try to make meaning of the experiences they've had. The key is to let people do it on their terms—not to force it but to offer them the opportunity and let them take it if they choose.

Concluding Difficult Conversations

So, how do you conclude a conversation with someone who has experienced trauma? It is important to bring a sense of closure. Remember how I said that before any interview, there are a few things I always tell a person to create a sense of safety and predictability? Well, I have a similar protocol for the end of a conversation.

Often I will say, "Thank you for trusting me with your story. This has been very valuable. This is going to be part of a piece that will air on the radio [or online or on Instagram] tomorrow [or next week or whenever]."

I might say, "Excerpts from our conversation will be included along with several other voices." Or I'll say, "Listeners will hear a slightly edited version of the conversation you and I just had." It's important not to make any false promises. If I'm talking to a lot of people for a story and I don't yet know which voices will be on the radio, then I say something more general, like, "What you told me today was so important. I learned a lot. Thank you for sharing it."

Dr. Katherine Porterfield, whom I mentioned earlier, has a great analogy. She compares such interviews to surgery. Before you go into surgery, you make a plan. You aren't going to be slicing at random. And then when you're done, you don't leave an open wound.

Having asked people to relive these very difficult experiences, part of your responsibility is to make sure, as best you can, that they're ready to reenter the rest of their day. So sometimes I'll even ask, "What are you doing next?" At their best, these kinds of conversations can actually help a person heal.

As storytellers, it is not our job to put our humanity aside. We bring our full selves to the stories we tell, including our empathy. This is one reason I think that, even though technology keeps advancing and making jobs obsolete in many sectors of the economy, it will never entirely replace journalists. Our humanity, our empathy, and our compassion are essential to our work. And in the hands of any storyteller, they are powerful tools.

But as we bring our humanity to this project, we also have to be aware of our own vulnerability. Telling stories about trauma can have an impact on storytellers as well. There is something called secondary traumatic stress. It comes from hearing about the firsthand traumatic experiences of someone else.

And so, while we monitor the well-being of the people we're interviewing, we have to pay attention to our own reactions, to our own psychological well-being, and we have to trust our instincts when we feel we are reaching our limit. Because it's only by taking care of ourselves that we will be able to preserve our ability to go out and keep doing the work.

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9

Telling Stories That Unfold over Time

Each day, when my colleagues at NPR and I discuss which stories we should be telling, the first question we ask is, "What's happening right now?" But beyond telling people what is happening, we have a deeper mission as journalists. We are trying to help people understand what is happening. Over time, events tend to repeat themselves, and so do people as they try to influence events or respond to them. If we only look at the here and now—if we tell stories without giving any thought to the past or to the context of events—then we're like horses wearing blinders that block out our peripheral vision. We miss the bigger picture. We fail to connect the dots. And much of our work, and the work of reporters before us, goes to waste. So in this lesson, we are going to talk about long-term storytelling—different approaches to following and telling a story over time in order to provide that broader perspective and deeper level of understanding.

Serializing a Refugee's Journey

So how do you approach a story that you want to tell over time? One way is by reporting on it and telling it to your audience piece by piece, almost like a serialized narrative. The power of this kind of storytelling is well established in fiction and in journalism.

The first time I tried long-term serialized storytelling myself, I had not really planned on it. It was late summer 2015. I was a correspondent based in London. I had just accepted a job hosting *All Things Considered* and was getting ready to move back to Washington DC. But for one of my last international reporting trips as a foreign correspondent, NPR decided to send me to the western coast of Turkey because it was the height of the Syrian refugee crisis.

More than 4 million Syrians had fled their country's civil war. Many of them had traveled over land through Turkey and were trying to get from there to Europe, where they hoped to settle in Germany, Sweden, or another welcoming country.

I flew to the coastal Turkish city of Izmir. In an earlier lesson, I told you about how I found a fixer on Instagram for this reporting project. Greece was just across the Aegean Sea from the city of Izmir. And by the time I arrived in Turkey, the Syrian refugee crisis had been in the news day after day for months.

It was the kind of story where new things kept happening, but they no longer felt new because the crisis seemed so endless. The sheer number of people making the risky crossing to Greece on small boats and rafts had become almost a blur. I knew that I needed a way to help people see the millions of refugees caught up in this crisis as more than just a number. But I wasn't sure how to do it.

Another thing on my mind, frankly, was that I was embodying a cliche. I was the foreign correspondent parachuting into a country I didn't know much about to snap up some stories and try to sound authoritative. But the truth was that I didn't have the context and history to provide new insights into this crisis. And I didn't have the time to acquire them.

So I came up with a way to make time. I asked my colleagues to help. I reached out to other correspondents across Europe and the editors who worked with all of us. And I said, "If I find one person to follow, will you help me tell their story?" My idea was that I would report on this person's experience in Turkey, but then other reporters would pick up the story as the person traveled to Greece and beyond. Each report would serve as a new chapter or installment. And by the end, instead of just getting one snapshot in time, we would have a full narrative.

One option for following a rapidly changing, complex situation over time is to do periodic check-ins with a protagonist who can offer regular insights into how important events around them are changing and what it's like to experience them at the personal level. A variation of this approach is to employ multiple protagonists.

In an earlier lesson, I compared a family's quest to get a generator after a hurricane to Homer's *Odyssey*. Well, this would really be the *Odyssey*. It was even in the exact same part of the world that Odysseus sailed through! My colleagues and editors agreed. After all, they had all been facing the same frustration I was. They'd been telling the Syrian refugee story over and over from the countries where they were based. And they were as eager as I was to try a different mode of storytelling.

So we had our plan. Now I just had to find my protagonist. We discussed the process of finding your protagonist in a previous lesson. Recall that the two most important criteria are typically that they be someone your audience can relate to or empathize with and that they be in a high-stakes situation.

Number two was easy. Every Syrian in Izmir, Turkey, was in a high-stakes situation. To be honest, number one wasn't that difficult either. As I walked along the sidewalk seeing people napping in 90° heat on flattened cardboard boxes, I thought, Every one of these people is a protagonist in a compelling story.

But in this case, I realized, there was a third key factor that would be just as important as the others: reliability. We would depend heavily on this person to share their journey with us. We couldn't be there every literal step of the way. We would need them to send us voice memos and take photos and to connect periodically with each participating reporter along the way—all while enduring the most difficult experience they had ever lived through.

One thing to consider is that not everyone is going to catch every episode of a multi-installment story. A single, half-hour story is an easier commitment for an audience to make.

Monzer Omar's Story

I met Monzer Omar sitting on a cardboard box on the sidewalk. He was an English teacher. The Syrian army had tried to force him to fight in Syria's bloody civil war. That same army had bombed his village, destroying it.

So Monzer left his pregnant wife and his daughters with his parents, and he set off on this journey. He told me he was hoping to settle in Germany and bring them over to join him. After our brief conversation, I asked if he would be open to letting us tell the story of his voyage. And he said yes. So I told the first part of his story—Ó Izmir. And then my colleagues took the baton as he traveled to Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and finally Germany.

One secret to doing this kind of storytelling well is zeroing in on specific details. They give people a more tangible way of grasping the reality of a saga as enormous as Monzer's.

I don't know if you've seen the Jordan Peele sci-fi/horror movie *Nope*. There's been a lot of discussion about the opening scene. A chimpanzee on the set of a 1980s sitcom goes on a rampage, attacking the cast. And in the wake of the destruction, the child actor at the center of it all finds a shoe left standing upright on its heel, perfectly balanced. That shoe remains a focal point for his memory of the incident. People have debated what that shoe means. But to me, it captures the way a small thing becomes a touchpoint for a larger experience.

As we told the story of Monzer's journey, we made an effort to highlight small details. He lost his glasses while crossing the Aegean Sea, so when he got to Greece, he was squinting. Another small detail was that as he prepared to cross into Germany, he shaved and put on his favorite aftershave. He'd brought a bottle of it with him all the way from Syria. After this long journey where he could carry only whatever was on his back, you could imagine what that precious bottle of aftershave must have meant to him.

Listeners had been hearing about Monzer Omar for weeks when, finally, he arrived in Germany. He talked about how strange it was to see adults there riding bicycles. In Syria, he only ever saw kids riding bikes. That's yet another one of those small, funny details that stick in the mind.

> ***One secret to doing this kind of storytelling well is zeroing in on specific details.***

We didn't end our series on Monzer with his arrival in Germany. In the years that followed, I kept updating his story for our listeners. I checked in with him as he looked for a job in Germany, as he struggled to learn the language, and as he fought to bring his family over to join him.

As time wore on and the refugee crisis continued, I couldn't help but wonder whether the story was having any impact at all. And then, one day I got a phone call. It was the office of the US ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power. She was going to Germany to hold a roundtable with Syrians about the refugee crisis. And she wanted to include Monzer Omar in the event.

You can imagine how I felt when I heard that. It felt like confirmation that my story had actually made a difference. I met Monzer for the first time in Izmir in September 2015. The last time I talked to him was in March 2017. He told us he had an important update.

So we sent a producer out to the German town where he was living. He opened the door to his apartment, and there were his wife and children. They had finally made it out of Syria to join him. He had just met his youngest daughter for the first time because, remember, his wife was pregnant when he left.

And of course, the story about that reunion would have been powerful even if you hadn't heard anything about Monzer's journey leading up to it. But as a climax to a story that we had been telling for 2 years, it just landed differently.

There were a lot of tears—from Monzer, from people in the newsroom, and from listeners who wrote in or tweeted their congratulations. And I think it's hard to have that kind of impact unless you've made such a long-term investment in a story.

I should note here that telling a serialized story in the news or as a documentary involves some serious investments. An organization needs to believe that it's worth investing the time and resources required for the project. And it's inevitably a gamble, since nobody can know how a story will develop over time.

Doing the kind of long-term storytelling that we've been exploring in this lesson requires a leap of faith—from you as the storyteller and from anyone supporting the effort. It's not just that when you start these stories, you can't know whether they will end sadly or joyfully. You also can't know whether they will yield clear lessons or only raise more questions. But the very uncertainty of these stories is part of what makes them so compelling and so worthwhile.

You, your characters, and your audience are going on the journey together. It's a journey of discovery, and even if it only demonstrates how much we still don't know, that, too, is a valuable kind of understanding.

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10

Live Storytelling (with or without Music)

When I'm not busy reporting the news, I sing with a band called Pink Martini. I've recorded songs with them and joined them on tour all over Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the US. Separate from all of that, I've also created and performed cabaret-style shows. And on its face, it may not seem like this has much to do with storytelling. But almost every song tells a story. And to connect with an audience when you're performing a song live, you need to think carefully about how you're relating that story to them—just as you would if you were telling a story on the radio or on the page. Now, you might not spend your free time entertaining audiences from the stage, but the fact is, we all tell stories live all the time—to our families over dinner, to our friends over a drink, at a company meeting, or in a wedding toast. Live performance is a skill that you can build, and the feedback you get from a live audience can make you a better teller of stories, no matter where or how you prefer to tell them. So in this lesson, we're going to explore the opportunities, challenges, and power of storytelling in live performance.

Know Your Material Well

First, some basics. All the topics that we've discussed so far in this series apply to live storytelling—what makes a story work, how to find a good story, how to choose your characters, how to structure the story, and so on.

A key difference with telling a story live, though, is timing. Probably the worst sin you can commit in live storytelling is boring your audience. So you need to keep your story concise and engaging at every turn.

Probably the worst sin you can commit in live storytelling is boring your audience.

You also need to make it easy to follow because people are only going to get one chance to hear what you say or sing, and if you confuse them, they may lose interest. To stay as connected with a live audience as possible, one of the best things you can do is make sure you know your material well.

When I sing, that always means memorizing the tune. When I'm giving a talk to a crowd of students, knowing my material well might mean getting it down to a few bullet points that can trigger my memory. Because if my eyes don't have to stay glued to the page, then they can connect with my audience.

Knowing my material well frees me up so I can focus on how people are reacting and adjust accordingly. So, how do you get to that level of comfort and familiarity? Practice is essential! It will cement your story in your memory, help you figure out your pacing, and reveal the snags that might trip you up.

When I'm learning the lyrics to a song—especially in a foreign language—I know that I need to know my material so well that even when adrenaline is pumping and I'm competing with a noisy crowd, I'll still have the words at my fingertips.

So here's a technique I use. I don't just practice at home until I can recite the words from memory when nothing else is happening around me. I practice until I can put on my headphones, play a different tune with competing lyrics,

and still recite the words to my own song smoothly, from memory. That's my way of ensuring that in a live performance, even if I'm distracted, off-balance, and thrown for a loop, those words are deeply ingrained enough to stay in my brain no matter what.

If you tend to get nervous, practice will build your self-confidence so you can relax and enjoy telling your story instead of dreading it. Bring your friends or family to listen and give you feedback. Watch their reactions. Look for what's working and what isn't.

These pointers might sound simple, but I feel their importance in my bones because I learned them and the others that I want to share with you through live experimentation—also sometimes known as trial by fire.

> ***I practice until I can put on my headphones, play a different tune with competing lyrics, and still recite the words to my own song smoothly, from memory.***

Performing with Pink Martini

It all began when I was in high school, back in the 1990s in Portland, Oregon. Pink Martini got started in Portland during those years, and I became a fan of theirs. I would go see them at any tiny bar where they had a show.

I kept going to their performances over the years and eventually became friends with them. They got bigger and started to tour the country. After I finished college, I moved to Washington DC. And whenever they came to town, I'd have them over to my house.

One night in 2008, Pink Martini had a night off in DC, so I hosted a barbecue. As it got late, we gathered around the piano inside, where Pink Martini's leader, Thomas Lauderdale, was taking requests. Everybody hollered along to "Home on the Range" and "9 to 5."

The next morning, Thomas Lauderdale called me at my desk at NPR. He said, "I'd forgotten that you can really sing! We're writing a song for the next album that we want a man to sing." (Pink Martini's lead singer, China Forbes, is a woman.) Thomas said, "Why don't you come to Portland and record the song with us?"

Now, I had done musical theater and sung in choirs when I was in high school and college, but I had never sung with a band, ever. I was sure it would never actually happen. But I immediately said yes. And to my shock, a few months later, I found myself heading toward a studio in Portland to record a song with the band. The song was called "But Now I'm Back." The tune came from a melody by Franz Schubert, but it had a big band swing beat. And the lyrics told the story of a man waiting outside a woman's door, apologizing for having disappeared on her and begging to be let back in.

We did about a thousand takes of the song. When we finally finished, Thomas said to me, "Well, now we need to find a time for you to perform this number live with us. Why don't you join us at the Hollywood Bowl?" So that's how I wound up making my debut—singing with a band for the first time—in front of 18,000 people.

Individual versus Collective Experience

It was only when I took the stage at the Hollywood Bowl that I realized what the biggest difference is between telling stories on the radio and performing live onstage. On the radio, you know your audience is out there, but they're somewhere between a concept and reality. From the stage, there is no mistaking the fact that thousands of people are there listening. If you can't see them in the dark, you can at least hear them, and you can see the flashes of their cameras.

Here's why that's important. No matter how many people are listening to NPR when I'm speaking on the radio, at any given moment I am just speaking to you. Wherever you are, you are having that singular experience with my voice and the story that I'm telling you. It's individual. And it's kind of a one-way street. If my story moves you to tears or laughter or rage, I may never know the impact it had on you.

But a live performance—whether it's a poetry slam, a comedy set, a concert with a band, or a performance of a play—is collective. Everyone is in a room together experiencing the same thing with a group that will never again exist in exactly that way. And the experience of each person in the crowd affects the experiences of everyone around them.

Whatever you do as a performer has a kind of amplified effect, and you, as the performer, feel it in real time. We've all felt what it's like when a performance is so fantastic that everyone leaps to their feet. Or when I forget my lyrics to a song and have to stop in the middle of it—woof, that is also something everyone feels. And so if you can hone your live performance and deliver it compellingly to a crowd, you can take people to heights that are unattainable any other way.

There's also something special about music and rhythm when you experience them in a crowd. Have you ever been on a dance floor and gotten lost in the music, where everyone is caught up in the same tune and moving to the same pulsing beat? Or maybe a political rally where the whole crowd starts chanting in unison? Suddenly, you become part of a collective. Your heartbeat is no longer the only rhythm that drives you. For a moment, each of us stops being ourselves and becomes a member of a powerful group. You stop being a "me" and become a "we."

If you can hone your live performance and deliver it compellingly to a crowd, you can take people to heights that are unattainable any other way.

Storytelling through Music

Pink Martini uses the power of music and song to conduct what you might call musical diplomacy—breaking down barriers to help people see each other as people rather than as strangers or others. The most meaningful song I've recorded with the band over the years was actually a rewrite of a tune in Spanish called "La Soledad," from Pink Martini's debut album, *Sympathique*.

The band wrote "La Soledad" in the 1990s, and I'd been singing it in concert for years. Then, in 2016, Thomas asked our friend Iyad Qasem—who has since passed away—to write new lyrics in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic. Iyad took the new title of the song from something his mother, a Palestinian refugee, used to say: "There is no breeze as sweet as the breeze of home."

He retitled the song "Finnisma Di," which means "in this summer breeze." And although the new lyrics sounded like they were about pining for a lost love, Iyad told us that he imagined these words being sung by a refugee longing for the homeland he may never see again.

It was an experience that I had reported stories about on trips to Turkey, Northern Iraq, and refugee camps across Europe. When I recorded the song, the Syrian refugee crisis was at its peak. As I sang "Finnisma Di," I thought of the people I'd met who were on those journeys to a new life, some of whom I've told you about.

We sang the song across the Arabic-speaking world: Casablanca, Tunis, and Abu Dhabi. And at each of these shows, before I began to sing, I would introduce Iyad to talk about the song's meaning. He would always end by saying, "And it is an honor to have this piece performed by my Jewish friend, Ari Shapiro." We would hug, Arab and Jew. And despite the cliche, or maybe because of it, the audience would stand and cheer. There were often tears. I would take a deep breath and sing the song.

Not every audience loved it, though. In 2017, we sang at the Beiteddine Festival, in the mountains outside Beirut. It felt especially significant to perform the song in Lebanon, a place that had taken in more Syrian refugees per capita than any other country in the world.

And when Iyad introduced the song, the applause felt more tepid than usual. After the concert ended, the festival organizer crisply informed him that while the music was excellent, it was "unnecessary" of him to mention that I was Jewish. When Iyad told me about that conversation backstage, he was bristling.

We both resigned ourselves to the reality that musical diplomacy can only do so much. So we went arm in arm to the after-show VIP reception and gorged on Middle Eastern pastries. Songs may not save the world, but they can make a difference.

Storytelling through Cabaret

And if you're adventurous, there are also other ways to marry storytelling with live musical performance. After I'd been performing with Pink Martini for several years, people started to ask if I would ever consider trying a different form—namely, cabaret. Some of the performers I admire most are people who have created their own solo cabaret shows that combine stories and songs.

A friend in London named Ben Walters helped me understand how cabaret can work as a mode of storytelling. He actually wrote his PhD thesis on cabaret and queer performance art. And he told me once that he thinks too many performers—Americans especially—confuse cabaret with musical revue. He said a musical revue is just a bunch of songs strung together with some anecdotes. But a cabaret needs to grow and change over the course of the evening. It needs to create a relationship with the audience and end in a different place from where it began. It needs a reason to exist, to be alive and dangerous.

In 2016, I got a call from a friend who said he was putting together a cabaret series. He was designing it for an old mansion in Washington DC that had been converted to an event space. And he planned to bring some of my favorite performers down from New York for the series. He offered to commission me to create a show.

> ***A cabaret needs to grow and change over the course of the evening. It needs to create a relationship with the audience and end in a different place from where it began.***

I decided to take a different approach to some of the same stories I'd been telling all my life. It occurred to me that all over the world—in wars and revolutions across time and space—there has always been music. And so I went back to people I had met in Ukraine, in Iraq, and in Scotland, and I asked them what they were singing when they marched in the square, or what music was in their earbuds as they trekked long distances to escape fighting in their homelands, or what songs were in their heads when they squeezed into a raft to cross the Mediterranean. The answers they gave me ranged from old folk songs to contemporary pop tunes.

I gave myself permission to center my own experience reporting on wars and revolutions. And I used music as a through line to tease out themes of resilience. I learned lyrics in half a dozen languages—a skill that I'd conveniently picked up from singing with Pink Martini. And then I did it onstage with a bunch of musicians playing piano, guitar, cello, bass, and drums.

I did not feel comfortable doing this. It felt really weird to place myself at the center of these stories I had told about others. It did not feel natural to take an experience I'd had in a journalistic context and transplant it into a musical setting.

I wasn't sure the show held together or made sense. But I figured, what was the worst that could happen? So, I took the stage. And it worked. People connected with the stories I was telling and the songs I was singing.

The venue was standing room only. They laughed at the double entendres in the Marlene Dietrich classic "The Boys in the Backroom." And when I brought it all back to the US in the end, people cried at the finale—a mashup of "Hard Rain" with "Here Comes the Sun." So it turned out that when I pushed myself through my doubts and fears and trusted this story I had put together with words and music, it reached people just the way I had hoped.

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11

The Power of Fiction

I've spent my working life in nonfiction. If something isn't true, it doesn't get into the stories I report. These days, everyone in the news media is fighting for the importance of truth. We're defending the value of fact-based reporting, trying to counter conspiracy theories and outright lies, and insisting that there are no such things as "alternative facts." Nevertheless, I want to take this lesson to talk about the importance of fictional stories. And I want to be clear: I have never actually written fictional stories. So this lesson is not going to teach you how to write fiction. But I hope it will help persuade you of the power of fiction and its influence—even over fact-focused people such as myself.

Inspiring Compassion through Fiction

For me, the stories that I find in fiction have always illuminated the world and helped me understand the people around me in a way that nonfiction does not. The author Viet Thanh Nguyen put this better than I could when I interviewed him about his short story collection, *The Refugees*.

Most of the characters in those stories have one foot in Vietnam and one in the United States, which mirrors the author's own family story. He came over from Vietnam with his parents when he was 4 years old.

So I asked him why he writes fiction when he could so easily write memoir instead. And he told me, "I think what fiction and stories in general can do is they can magnify one person's experience or one person's imagination and transmit them to a much larger audience."

Viet Thanh Nguyen told me that his life as a refugee was difficult and also that difficulty made his life richer. He said:

> I wish everybody had a sense of what it was like to be an outsider, to be an other, to be able to look at themselves with what W. E. B. Du Bois called "a sense of double consciousness"—experiencing yourself from the inside but also experiencing oneself as other people see you. Because that is partly what gives rise to compassion and empathy—the sense that you are not always at the center of the universe.

The sense that you are not always at the center of the universe—that is the power of the story, whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

The sense that you are not always at the center of the universe—that is the power of the story, whether it's fiction or nonfiction. That is the mission of almost every journalistic project I do. It's an effort to help people see the world through the eyes of someone else, someone completely different from themselves.

Envisioning Reality through Fiction

I met a man named Rubil Saha on the Indian island of Ghoramara. His homeland was being swallowed by rising seas. Every time the tides destroyed his house, he rebuilt farther inland. And when I spoke with him, he told me through tears, "This is my motherland, so I can't abandon it. The pull of the motherland roots me here. I'm drowning." His terrible dilemma was all too real. But the reporting trip on which I met him in 2016 only happened because of fiction.

Back in 2004, long before I became a host of *All Things Considered*, I read a book for fun called *The Hungry Tide*, by Amitav Ghosh. The novel describes a real place on the border of India and Bangladesh.

If you picture India as a diamond, this is in the eastern corner. It's the world's largest mangrove forest—full of trees that survive in the zone where land and brackish water meet. There's a patchwork of islands—some as small as sandbars, others miles long. His vivid fictional portrayal of this watery landscape burrowed into my psyche, only to reemerge 12 years later.

At the time, my team and I were planning a reporting trip to India focused on climate change. We wanted to look into whether a developing country could provide more than a billion people with cars, refrigerators, and air conditioning in a sustainable way that didn't bust the world's carbon budget. I knew that beyond reporting from the Indian capital, New Delhi, we also needed to show the present-day impact of climate change on the people experiencing it the most.

Ghoramara Island

So, with the voices of characters from *The Hungry Tide* still whispering in my ears, we decided to visit the Sundarbans, the archipelago he described in his book. I had never met Amitav Ghosh before, but I contacted him and told him about our plans.

And he told me that climate change had already transformed the place since he'd written about it. Mud banks that used to turn red with crabs were now still. Trees that used to light up at night with fireflies were dark. He said mangrove islands are defined by change, but this was different—noncyclical. Tides were taking away chunks of land that wouldn't return.

My team flew to the big city of Kolkata and then drove hours to the water's edge. It was this strange experience to feel my feet squelch into mud that I had read about in stories years earlier. We launched our boat into a muddy estuary where three rivers converge. And as we motored past islands, an Irrawaddy dolphin popped out of the water beside us—a sign of good luck, according to local folklore.

We reported stories on what we encountered as we traveled: a village where an ancient goddess named Bonbibi is worshiped by Hindus, Muslims, and Christians alike, and the growing problem of man-eating Bengal tigers encroaching on humans as water swallows the tigers' habitat.

And after a few days, we reached the island of Ghoramara. Its shoreline looked like a block of cheese that had been nibbled by a giant mouse. The coast was gouged open, and palm trees leaned precariously out over the waves. Their root balls were partially exposed to the salt air. Decades before our visit, the island had been home to 40,000 people. By the time we arrived, just 3,000 lived there. The island had lost half its land since 1969.

We met this wizened man in his 80s named Debendra Tarek, who led us into his hut made of mud and straw. He took out a handful of rough brown rice and told us it was a special variety bred to resist saltwater. Planting it was his village's last-ditch effort to avoid another form of apocalypse—death by starvation.

As I told these stories on the radio, Amitav Ghosh's novel inspired me. And I hoped that the narratives I wove through my chosen medium of journalism might somehow lodge inside some other person and subtly change their path in the same way that Ghosh's book had changed mine so many years earlier.

A few years after that reporting trip, I contacted Amitav Ghosh again, this time to interview him about a novel he'd just written called *Gun Island*. That book is a modern retelling of a Bengali myth, weaving in themes of climate change and migration. When I asked Ghosh what ancient stories could tell us about our present-day experience, here's what he said: "I realized that what these old legends were about were exactly what we are living through today. Catastrophic floods, droughts, famines, storms." He said, "Today, when we have these catastrophes unfolding around us, we don't seem to be able to even imaginatively grapple with what's in front of us."

Putting it even more succinctly, he said, "The world of fact is outrunning the world of fiction." That's why he reached back to an ancient legend to create his new novel. Stories from thousands of years ago, he felt, could provide a level of understanding that our contemporary imagination can barely wrestle with.

> ***"One of the great beauties of the novel as a form is that it shows us that human nature is the great constant. Human nature is the same in all places, in all times, in all languages."***
>
> ***—Salman Rushdie***

Viewing Human Nature through Fiction

There was a cover story in *New York Magazine* in 2017 with the headline "Can Our Democracy Survive Tribalism?" The premise of the story was that we can look around the world and see examples of places where people killed each other over seemingly small differences. Maybe it was Sunnis and Shi'a in Iraq and Syria, or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. And the question this article explored was whether the United States is trending in a similar direction.

The article's author, Andrew Sullivan, described what he called "two coherent tribes, eerily balanced in political power, fighting not just to advance their own side but to provoke, condemn, and defeat the other." Remember, he wrote this in 2017.

And I think anybody would have to agree that since then, the trend lines have moved more in that direction—not less. And so, as I think about possible solutions to this problem, yes, journalism is one important solution. But so is fiction.

When I interviewed Salman Rushdie in 2017 about his novel *The Golden House*, he put it this way: "One of the great beauties of the novel as a form is that it shows us that human nature is the great constant. Human nature is the same in all places, in all times, in all languages."

The Israeli author Etgar Keret told me he used to write lots of op-eds, but he doesn't anymore. He said to me, "The moment you express an opinion about something in this world, then it becomes more and more tribal."

So these days, he writes fiction instead. In his short story "The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary," a rich and lonely man buys everyone's birthdays. Each morning, someone's mother calls and sings "Happy Birthday" to him, which makes perfect sense in a sort of dream logic—like, if you have more money than you can possibly spend and you're still unhappy, why wouldn't you buy up all the birthdays? Keret said to me:

> The moment that you write things that are more metaphorical and not a statement about reality itself, people let some of their defenses down. And maybe, if I'm lucky, then they get disoriented enough that they can rethink something. Not to mention, the reading experience is far more entertaining than a screed about income inequality.

Fighting Division through Fiction

At the last Tony Awards ceremony before the COVID pandemic shut down Broadway, the night's big winner was *Hadestown*. *Hadestown* is a musical that, like some of the other stories we've been talking about in this lesson, taps into myths and archetypes. It retells the ancient Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

You might be familiar with the tale: Eurydice goes to the Underworld. Orpheus follows to save her, and he sings a song so beautiful that it melts the heart of Hades. That part of the myth speaks to the power of art.

And then comes the catch. Orpheus and Eurydice can leave, Hades decrees, but Orpheus must walk first, with Eurydice following behind. If he reaches the surface without turning around, they're free. If he looks over his shoulder to make sure she's there, she'll be doomed to spend eternity in the Underworld.

Whether or not you remember your Greek mythology, you know how this tragedy ends. *Hadestown* was directed by a woman named Rachel Chavkin—the only woman directing a musical on Broadway in 2019. And in her speech accepting the 2019 Tony Award for best director, she called for greater racial and gender diversity on Broadway. She said this: "Power structures try to maintain control by making you feel like you're walking alone in the darkness. Even when your partner is right there at your back."

> ***In a time of dangerous division, I think stories can be one of the strongest weapons on the other side—the side of empathy.***

Those power structures have a lot to gain by dividing us. Exploiting our suspicion of one another—exacerbating our tribalism—allows politicians to cling to power. Demonizing people who disagree with us is good business for some companies. Outrage gets clicks. Too many people have too much to gain by encouraging us all to view people with suspicion. So that's never going to entirely go away.

But in a time of dangerous division, I think stories can be one of the strongest weapons on the other side—the side of empathy. "The powerful may own the present, but writers own the future." Those are the words of Salman Rushdie, speaking before the United Nations in May 2022. He went on: "We are not helpless. Even after Orpheus was torn to pieces, his severed head, floating down the river Hebrus, went on singing, reminding us that song is stronger than death."

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12

Breaking Storytelling's Rules

Throughout this course, we've discussed ideas, approaches, and principles that you can use to create and tell stories so that they have power and impact. Put them all together and you've got something you can use as a tool kit or a rule book. But in our final lesson, I want to tell you why you shouldn't think of them as a rule book—and why you should toss your writing rule books out. There are always new ways to approach and tell stories. You could really look at the evolution of any field as a series of leaps forward that happened because somebody broke the rules. Pick any industry, and you can identify the people who saw a different way to do things and changed their field forever. Put another way, history is made by innovators. So I want to encourage you to break the rules of storytelling. I can't tell you how to break the rules; that would just be giving you another rule. But I can tell you how I and others have done it to help you decide how you want to do it yourself.

The Novelty of NPR

For context, I'm going to start with a brief account of how rule breaking has shaped my field of audio storytelling. When NPR launched *All Things Considered* in 1971, there was already a long tradition of telling stories through audio. Everybody knew what radio news reports were supposed to sound like. They were supposed to sound like Edward R. Murrow, the voice of CBS News.

If you wanted to tell a story through sound, you needed to have a stern, male, white voice of authority. The subjects you talked about would be world leaders or national and global events of great import, like the Blitz on London. Your pronunciation would be hyperarticulated. Your sentences would be declarative. And your voice would be that of a capital-B broadcaster.

But when NPR came along, it said, What if we break those rules? What if instead of talking at you, we talk to you, like someone at a dinner party? What if we hire—gasp—women to cover important stories and not just force them into a niche of home economics and fashion segments? And what if we focus on the lives of ordinary people just as much as the lives of presidents and generals?

At the time, these were just not things that were widely done in mainstream radio news. There were, of course, some standout radio organizations that did things differently. California-based Pacifica Radio had a groundbreaking news and public affairs team lead by journalist Elsa Knight Thompson.

It also aired political commentaries and cutting-edge cultural programming. Chicago's WFMT broadcast the work of Studs Terkel, who recorded and published oral histories of people talking about their daily lives.

> ***For a national broadcast network, NPR's approach was almost a complete break from the rules of how to do audio storytelling—almost revolutionary.***

But for a national broadcast network, NPR's approach was almost a complete break from the rules of how to do audio storytelling—almost revolutionary. Susan Stamberg is one of NPR's founding mothers. When Susan became host of *All Things Considered*, she made history. She was the first woman ever to anchor a nationally broadcast nightly news program.

What happened over the years that followed is a pattern that we'll see repeat again and again. The style that was at first revolutionary started to become expected—predictable—maybe even a little bit boring. The sound of NPR became as familiar, as recognizable, and as mockable as the sound of Edward R. Murrow had been decades earlier.

In the 1990s, *Saturday Night Live* even created a parody of NPR segments. It was a sketch about a show called *Delicious Dish*. It starred Ana Gasteyer, Molly Shannon, and Rachel Dratch playing the hosts. They spoke in soft, almost whispery voices.

If you don't occasionally try and fail, then you aren't taking risks.

Rule Breaking at NPR

This public radio style was so ubiquitous that by the time I showed up at NPR in 2001, I had the mistaken impression that radio stories almost always had to sound the NPR way. There were entertainment shows on public radio that sounded different—like *Car Talk* and *A Prairie Home Companion*. But those weren't journalism.

I was aware of one exception to this apparent rule of radio journalism, though. That was *This American Life*. Ira Glass launched *This American Life* in 1995. He'd been a producer on *All Things Considered*, and then he became a reporter in Chicago covering education.

NPR actually passed him up as a host because the bosses at the time didn't think Ira Glass sounded the way an NPR host was "supposed" to sound. In fact, he did sound different. And when he created *This American Life*, he built an entire show around storytelling and journalism that sounded different from anything else on public radio.

His interviews would leave in some of the ums, uhs, and long pauses. In choosing stories, his team valued things that were quirky and odd rather than just significant or "newsworthy." The pacing and tone were different from anything else on public radio.

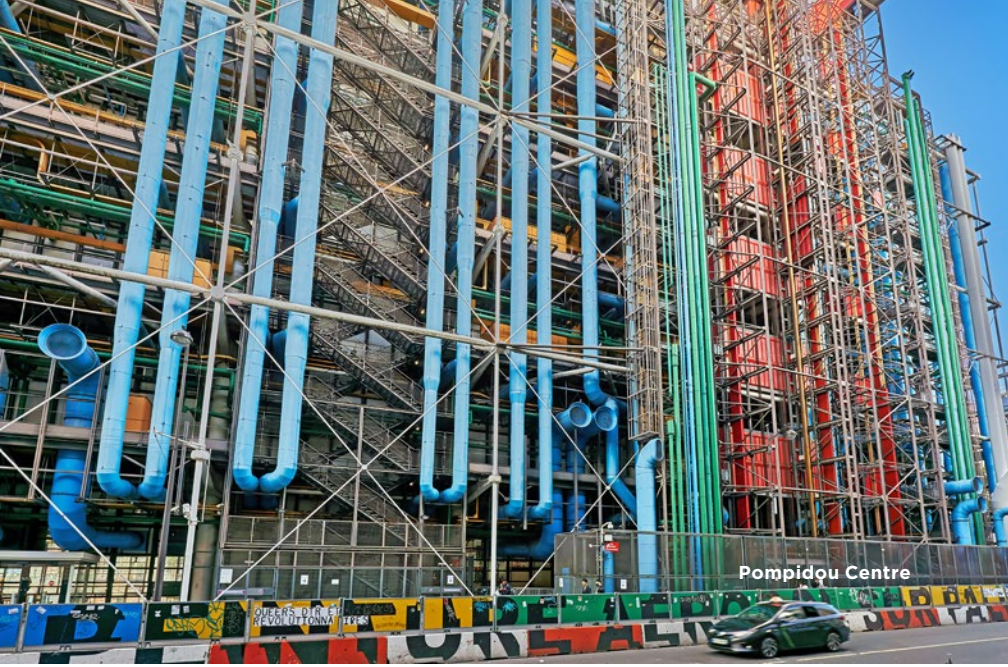
> ***When Ira Glass created* This American Life*, he built an entire show around storytelling and journalism that sounded different from anything else on public radio.***

This American Life gave me the tantalizing sense that new approaches to radio storytelling were possible. And it opened a door for other innovators. In 2002, a new radio show and podcast called *Radiolab* launched. It was hosted by two guys named Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. And it sounded like nothing I'd heard before. The tempo was different, almost erratic.

The two hosts had a rapport that was fast and overlapping. I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but when two people cohost *All Things Considered*, we tend not to talk to each other. Jad and Robert did. Revolutionary!

They also wove audio into their stories in ways that caught the listener off guard. Where an NPR story might lull you into a rhythm—reporter narration, guest statement, reporter narration—*Radiolab* stories had a pacing that could at times be jagged. One of the things *Radiolab* did that was so new was that instead of just using the audio of the "official" part of the interview, they would include the phone ringing and the person picking up.

Or they'd weave in the producer saying, "Hey, I just need to get a level on your voice. Could you tell me what you had for breakfast?" So in the final product, the gears and mechanics of the show were visible—or audible—to the audience.



Pompidou Centre

In a way, it reminds me of what the rule-breaking architects Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano did with the Pompidou Centre in Paris. When they designed that building in the 1970s, they put the building's guts on the outside. So you could see the ductwork, the elevators, the pipes, and the electrical wiring. It was revolutionary in the world of architecture. It became one of the signature styles that Richard Rogers was known for. Of course, over the following years, lots of other architects tried to mimic that, often less artfully. And the same thing happened with *Radiolab*.

Today, if you listen to podcasts and radio shows, you hear everywhere the sort of stuff that sounded so original when Jad and Robert started doing it in the early days of *Radiolab*. In fact, right around the time Jad left the show, in early 2022, I heard him tell a group of journalists that he ultimately banned the show from doing that anymore. Once again, the rule-breaking technique that seemed so novel had become something of a cliché.

I won't go point by point through all of the ways that audio storytelling has evolved in the last 20 years, but suffice it to say that the pattern of rule breaking, rule formation, and more rule breaking has continued.

The best rule breakers, I came to realize, are not chaotic, constant rule breakers. They do it judiciously.

One of the most exciting things that happened was that podcasting lowered the barriers to entry. Suddenly, people from marginalized groups—people whose voices had not reached a wide audience before—could tell their own stories, and listeners responded.

In the sprawling world of podcasts today, you can find so many new and interesting ways of telling stories. It's possibly the best time in history right now to be telling stories through sound because you don't have to wait for someone's permission. You don't need an NPR or a CBS to wave their magic wand in your direction. You can experiment and make things and share them, and if they are great, they can find an audience.

Continuing Innovation at NPR

In my life and career, rule breaking has taken different forms. Sometimes it was in the way I told individual stories on the radio. Sometimes it was in the form of major life choices.

One example was my decision to try breaking away from the traditional story structure of radio news when reporting on a hurricane that hit New Orleans. I need to give you a bit of context to understand this one.

Almost every reporter piece that you hear on the radio is built of the same components. The shorthand that we use to describe it at NPR is "acts and tracks." The tracks are the script that the reporter reads, usually in our studio rather than in the field. The acts are actualities—tape clips of people speaking.

There are also a couple more traditional story elements. There's ambi, which is short for *ambient sound*. It's the sound of a protest or of birds singing in a forest or whatever the surrounding sounds of the scene might be.

And then there are standups. A standup is when the reporter records themselves in the field. The information in a standup might be the same as what you would get from narration recorded after the fact. But delivering it in the field and unscripted off the cuff gives it a bit more immediacy—it helps to immerse the listener in the scene.

So I decided to try breaking the rules of acts/tracks/ambi/standup. I set out to do a piece with no tracks—just standups. It would consist entirely of narration that I'd recorded in the field, connecting the clips of people talking. I wanted to see if I could do a story with no writing at all—no script—just chronicling what I was seeing and weaving it all together with tape of people talking and sounds of what was going on around me.

So, I tried it in 2008 after a hurricane called Gustav swept through New Orleans. Fortunately, the storm did way less damage than it was expected to—far less than Hurricane Katrina had done 3 years earlier. And so after the hurricane passed, I went out and basically gave listeners a tour of the city. So in the piece, you hear me driving around fallen trees, pulling up to the canals and describing the water levels, and running into a flock of chickens crossing the road. Why did the chickens cross the road? I don't know.

I wade in galoshes through a flooded street and talk to locals. I even run into the famous weatherman Al Roker and have a little conversation with him. He's at the one open restaurant in town, called Mr. Chubby's. He's eating a cheeseburger and says that, in a hurricane, "You want something that's going to help weigh you down because, you know, you're blowing around a lot."

This story didn't win any awards, but it was fun, and people enjoyed it. It sounded different from anything else on the radio. But part of intentionally breaking the rules successfully is knowing when to do it. In this case, it worked because the story I was telling was so much about a place and the people and scenes in it. In a story that was more about ideas or concepts, this wouldn't work so well.

> ***Part of intentionally breaking the rules successfully is knowing when to do it.***

Give yourself permission to try something totally off-the-wall. Think of something wild, creative, new, and strange that will make people remember it more than a decade later.

Breaking Internal Rules

I pushed myself to try a different kind of storytelling that was longer form, longer lasting. I wrote a memoir. It's called *The Best Strangers in the World.* Now, lots of journalists write memoirs every year, so writing my own wasn't breaking any rules of my industry. But it felt like it broke some of my internal rules, forcing me to work in ways that definitely took me out of my comfort zone.

First of all, by the nature of the genre, I had to play the central role in it and be OK with that. I encountered a similar challenge when I created my first cabaret show, but this was even more about me and at a level of detail way beyond my stage shows. Writing a memoir forced me to look at the things I have experienced in both my professional and personal lives in a different way. I had to recast myself as not only the narrator but also the protagonist.

The process of writing a memoir was also very foreign to me. It felt like starting a new exercise routine and discovering muscles that I didn't know existed. I found that the storytelling tools I used had to change. I couldn't lean on the voices of other people as much as I was accustomed to doing, or on sound at all. Instead of writing for the ear, I had to write for the eye.

Suddenly, my sentences grew longer. They sprouted dependent clauses. They violated all the rules that I'd been taught about storytelling on the radio. And in between bouts of writing the memoir, I had to switch back to the radio storytelling that my day job requires.

It was disorienting—like constantly switching back and forth between driving on the right and left sides of the road. Gradually, though, I developed a routine. I found that the first draft of each chapter took the shape of a straightforward chronicle of things I had done and witnessed: first this, then that, then the next thing. I would set the chapter aside and go on to work on other parts of the book. And when I came back to it weeks or months later, I would inevitably have a new insight into what the chapter was actually about.

And then I would go back through and rewrite the chapter to try to tease out that theme more explicitly, more vividly. It was maybe a bit like trying to get the light just right on a painting of some clouds. To be completely honest with you, writing my memoir was hard.

At times, it was stressful and confounding. After all, we like to think we're the ones who know ourselves best. Yet it's others who will judge whether a memoir creates a fair likeness. Like creating my first stage show, the writing process made me feel exposed and vulnerable and unsure of myself, which was not a pleasant feeling!

But there was also something reassuring about the experience. Because by this point in life, I've learned that awkward, tightrope-walking, uncertain precariousness is how it should feel when you break the rules. And breaking the rules is how you can continue to grow as a storyteller. I hope you'll break many rules and tell many fine stories.

Awkward, tightrope-walking, uncertain precariousness is how it should feel when you break the rules. And breaking the rules is how you can continue to grow as a storyteller.

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