Matters

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He will be performing "Beowulf, the Only One," Sunday at Riverwalk Cafe, Nashua.

Stories teach us values in a world that needs more kindness. In a recent Time article, Kristin van Ogtrop tells of her son, a new fourth-grade teacher, deciding to put a suggestion box in his classroom. Instead of suggestions, the children filled the box with appeals for kindness. "My son is routinely surprised ... by how badly they treat one another. The children want to be on the receiving end of kindness but have trouble handing it out. On a daily basis, they are tripped up by three obstacles: lack of impulse control; thoughtlessness; and difficulty with forgiveness, or letting things go." Sounds like humanity – at any age.

The group psychology of kindness is an ancient concept from our hunter-gatherer days – the idea that if one member of the tribe suffers, we are all at risk, so, as Kristin van Ogtrop writes: "taking care of one another is hard-wired to the species."

In "On Kindness," Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, and Barbara Taylor, a historian, reveal an unexpected truth, namely that though we tend to think of kindness as an immutable and universal human trait, like love or hate, there have been "cultural shifts" in kindness, influenced by the predominant thought or mood of an age. Evidently, there are historical trends in kindness. While early Christians modelled tales of the Good Samaritan, highlighting kindness as an equalizer that binds us together. The Victorians thought of kindness as primarily a woman's concern. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed compassion was a primary trait of humanity.

Storytelling encourages us to feel – and having the courage to feel is what allows us to move beyond failure. Thinking about how we failed is evidently not enough to transform it and transcend it. Noelle Nelson, Selin Malkoc, and Baba Shiv, authors of "Emotions Know Best: The Advantage of Emotional Versus Cognitive Reponses to Failure," (Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 2017) suggest that we need to have the courage to let ourselves feel loss "to open ourselves up to a painful experience…Emotional pain inspires us to learn from our mistakes."

Storytelling is interwoven with culture – all over the world. We thrive on the solid foundation of a beginning, a middle and an end. We sharpen memory through storytelling. Yet most would agree that storytelling was de-valued for most of the 20th century. In his article "The Science of Storytelling," Forbes contributor Steve Denning refers to the "eclipse of storytelling" and Brian Boyd's book On Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction.

Integrating scientific evidence, evolutionary theory, linguistics, artificial intelligence, game theory, anthropology, economics, neurophysiology, philosophy, and psychology, Boyd summarizes his findings: "In retrospect, the 20th Century can be seen as a giant experiment by the human race to find out what could be accomplished if organizations treated people as things and communicated to them in abstractions, numbers and analysis, rather than through people-friendly communications such as stories. Employees became 'human resources' to be mined ... customers became 'demand,' or 'consumers,' or 'eyeballs,' to be manipulated, rather than living, feeling human beings to be delighted."

Boyd sees a 21st century rebirth of interest in storytelling. According to Boyd, though storytelling might seem frivolous, it is central to innovation and of critical importance to organizations and individuals as a mechanism for cognitive play – stimulation for a lively mind. Stories are not just objects to admire; they are tools to help us think. An added bonus is that, in this world of constant distraction, storytelling requires that listeners bestow their attention on the storyteller.

Live storytelling sparks the imagination in a particular way, inspiring us to produce pictures in our minds. In his dissertation "To Teach Science, Tell Stories," James A. Rose recounts taking a guided tour of the Font-de-Gaume cave in the French province of Dordogne, where visitors can still get a close-up view of more than 200 Paleolithic paintings of animals – depictions of a herd of reindeer, bison, an ibex and a cave bear. Rose: "They are not primitive sketches. ... They are breathtakingly lifelike ... the first moving pictures….They are certainly awe inspiring and one cannot help but almost hear these images echoing as stories."

Imagination is invaluable not just because it allows us to create our own interior moviescape. It is important because it stretches perspective and invites new ways of seeing things, of viewing the world. In his article "The Power of Imagination," Remez Sasson, reminds us of the transformative experiences that happen when the imagination is engaged: "Imagination makes it possible to experience a whole world inside the mind. It gives the ability to look at any situation from a different point of view, and to mentally explore the past and the future."

Bodkin: "If today's children are digitally 'rewired,' why bother with spoken-word storytelling? Unlike movies, there are no visuals. Where's the interactivity? Where are the buttons? On the surface, the entertainment experience looks incomplete.

"Simply put, therein lies its power. The act of listening taps our inborn ability to create mental images. If 'imagination is more important than knowledge,' as Einstein famously said, then the very act of imagining builds strength and flexibility in kids' minds, firing up new neural nets and improving their ability to gain knowledge across the board. It's not just stories they learn, it's how they use their minds Spoken-word stories are interactive with the brain itself."

Ponder this – live storytelling is one of the few things that technology cannot recreate.

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