

*The following is an excerpt from the book:*

## **Insight Improvisation**

### **Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

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*To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.*

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## Storytelling

Telling a personal story takes courage. It is challenging to stand up and share, with vulnerability and honesty, the truth of one's life—to be seen, heard, and risk being judged. What if my story is uninteresting? What if I don't tell it well? What if this story reveals something *too* personal?

*The storyteller enters the space unprepared, unrehearsed. She stands before the audience and closes her eyes, taking a moment to breathe and center. Then she opens them and connects with the audience.*

*She recalls the first moment in her story as if it's happening now. She speaks aloud what she sees and feels—where she is, what kind of day it is, what she hears and smells—opening to all of the senses.*

*She re-lives the story as she tells it, moving through the space, portraying characters as they appear, transforming her voice and body.*

*She takes her time, discovering the story moment by moment, allowing herself to breathe, to feel her feelings. By listening to herself in this way, she discovers how the story needs to end.*

I first learned this method of storytelling in the early 1990's from Jean-Claude van Itallie, the original playwright for the Open Theater and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Van Itallie's approach felt natural to me: rather than feel a pressure to perform and "get it right," I was being asked to simply re-enter my memory of a time, to relive that moment, and to let my body and voice be an open channel for whatever need be expressed.

There was no judgment about what kind of moment it was—positive, negative, mundane, dramatic. Jean-Claude fostered a safe and judgment-free space where anything could be expressed.

I've come to realize that this method of spontaneous storytelling fosters mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness: in order to relive the moment in all its fullness, one must be completely present, open to all the senses, and connected with one's own emotions—as well as connecting with the audience.

This chapter is based on van Itallie's teachings, as well as other refinements I have incorporated over the years. In addition to Jean-Claude, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues at the Ariel Group, present and past, who have contributed to my understanding of storytelling.

Storytelling Guidelines	
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>What did you see and hear?</i></li> <li>▪ <i>What resonated for you personally?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Dream-Telling</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Duet Storytelling</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Amplified Story</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Sung Story</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Applications</i></li> </ul>

### Basics I: Sharing a Moment from Today

Here’s a storytelling warm-up for use in a workshop setting (or one-to-one).  
 Sitting in a circle with the group, lead a brief meditation. Then add these instructions:

“Keeping your eyes closed, cast your mind back to any moment from today.”

Pause to allow the group to think back to a moment. “Notice the sensory details—colors, smells, etc. Also, who else is with you in this moment; how do they interact with you? How do you feel?”

“With your eyes still closed, I’m going to invite you to share your moment aloud. I’ll begin with mine, and then we can go in any order, like popcorn. Please allow a pause, a silence between one person’s moment and the next, to allow things to land, as well as to clear the slate for what’s next. We’re going to keep our eyes closed throughout to help maintain our mindful awareness, letting the listening and the sharing be an extension of our meditation.”

(Note that the verbal instructions to the group are purposely kept simple at this stage to allow them to tell their moment in any way they like. Later the storytelling guidelines will become more specific.)

As you demonstrate sharing your moment, speak in the present tense, as if it’s happening now. Relax and breathe. Speak slowly, feeling everything you are saying. Your moment should be brief—perhaps six to ten short sentences or phrases. For example:

*I emerge from the bedroom, still groggy. There’s Micah in his high-chair, and Jasmine at the table. I go and kiss them on the head. “Good morning, Daddy!” I see a bowl of cereal no one is eating. Soggy Cheerios. Baby spoon. Sweet milk in my mouth. I smile.*

Once everyone has shared their moment, end with a brief closing meditation before inviting everyone to open their eyes and stretch. You can also additionally debrief the exercise, inviting comments on what the group experienced.

This exercise can be a surprisingly powerful introduction to storytelling. With eyes closed a feeling of intimacy is created, as when sharing stories around a campfire or listening to stories on the radio (a la “The Moth”). As participants become increasingly comfortable, the sharing can grow progressively deeper and more personal.

Note that if you are leading this exercise first thing in the morning, you can invite moments from the day before, or “the last 24 hours.”

## Basics II: Sharing a Childhood Moment

Still in a circle with the group—if you’re continuing from the last warm-up have everyone take a moment to stand up and stretch first—demonstrate sharing a childhood moment. Relive it as you tell it (you can remain seated for this demo, but still be physically animated). For example:

*Foggy day. Salty air. Wind—in my face. I’m biking...down a hill, into the schoolyard! [Pedaling rapidly. In a young boy’s voice:]*

*“Hello, headquarters, this is Agent X-1. Over!”*

*[Bending over radar screen, pointing at it, and speaking in a gruff, commanding voice:]*

*“Roger Agent X-1, this is Headquarters, we have you on radar, over!”*

*“Hello headquarters, this is Agent X-1. I think I see the enemy up ahead. Over...”*

*“Roger Agent X-1, we have the enemy on radar. It’s dangerous! Turn back! Turn back!”*

*[The boy gasps and suddenly stops. In a panic:]*

*The school building is in front of me. All the windows are like dark eyes,  
looking at me. No one is around! What should I do?!?*

*I'm Agent X-1. I have to continue my mission. I BIKE ON!!!*

*[Pedals furiously.]*

Use your demo to discuss storytelling techniques with the group: “What stood out? What was different from how one normally tells a story?”

Each of the techniques is designed to remove the distance between the audience and the story, making the moment as immediate as possible:

**Relive in the telling—it’s happening now.** Use the present tense. “I am 10 years old...” (not, “When I was 10 years old...”)

**Use bullet phrases.** Cut “and” and “um.” End each thought with a small pause, as if you were ending the phrase with a period. “Foggy day. Salty air.” (not, “When I was a young boy I used to wake up and it would be foggy out and the air smelled like salt and um...”)

**Open the senses.** Evoke smells, tastes, touch, etc. “Foggy day. Salty air. Wind in my face.”

**Play the roles.** Pay attention to the three narrative stances: the narrator, *you* as a character in the story, and other characters. Differentiate the roles physically and vocally. E.g., how does gruff Headquarters look and sound as he says “*Roger Agent X-1, we have the enemy on radar. It’s dangerous!*”

Next, have the participants close their eyes and recall a childhood moment—go with the first memory that comes to mind—it is not necessary to choose an “exciting” moment, any will do. Have them visualize and recall where they were, the time of year, what they were wearing. Open to the sensory details. See the other characters, hear them. Let the scene play out in their mind’s eye.

When they are ready they can open their eyes. Then have one person share with the group—ask them if they are OK if you coach them a little. If the storyteller would like to stand and move around for their story, encourage them! If the group is large, after a few have shared in the circle, you can split them into pairs or small groups so everyone has a chance.

### **Performing a Story**

Invite the group to sit in a shallow semi-circle, forming an audience. For the Storytelling exercise, we are building on the childhood-moments warm-up by adding a few new guidelines:

**Enter empty.** In its pure form, entering empty means not choosing a story in advance, but instead letting it “choose you.” As you prepare to tell your story (it could be before, during or after your vertical or horizontal moment—see below), relax and allow any memory from your life to enter your mind. As you see it, describe it aloud—and begin to live it on the stage. Discover the characters and scenes of the story moment-by-moment; find an ending that feels organic.

Entering empty is a little like stepping up on a high diving board: what will happen next? It’s very exciting to take such a risk. But if one proceeds slowly and

mindfully, it's almost impossible to fail: any life moment (or series of moments) can form the basis of an engaging and meaningful story, if one is fully present to each moment.

It helps to slow down—sometimes radically. Take your time to discover what's next. Don't be afraid of pauses, even silences. And if you forget something important, it's OK to loop back and replay that moment. Let yourself break the rules—your narrative can jump around in time if it needs to.

If you prefer to choose your story in advance, “entering empty” can be reinterpreted as not planning the story in advance, and not deciding how it will end, but instead discovering that along the way. Rather than choose a story you've told many times before, try picking one you've rarely or never told. Choose a significant moment from your life, or one that captures a certain feeling or emotion you'd like to explore.

**Begin with a vertical and a horizontal moment.** A vertical moment is a chance to relax, breathe, and center. Close your eyes, place one hand on your belly, and bend your knees slightly. Breathe into your belly, and let there be a relaxed sigh of relief through your open mouth on the out-breath. Take your time. Only you can be the judge of how long you need—and how many breaths you need—to truly relax and center.

Then, open your eyes and take a horizontal moment. Keeping your hand on your belly, make eye contact with the audience, one person at a time. Take your time and take a fully belly-breath in and out as you make relaxed eye contact with each person. Do not rush and scan the audience. You do not have to meet everyone's eyes, but try to connect with at least three individuals. The key is to relax and let them in: how can you receive

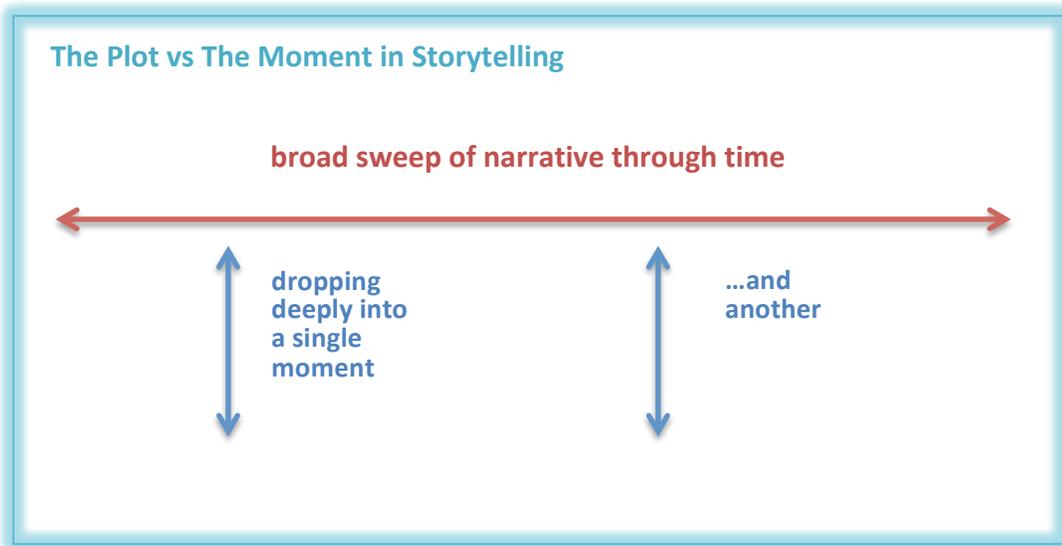
the other person with your eyes? It's okay to smile. Let your mouth drop open to fully relax—don't worry about looking silly. This is an exercise designed to cultivate self-awareness, a training in learning to relax in the face of fear and being seen.

Then, when you are ready, step forward and tell your story.

**Bring the story to life in the space.** Move, use the whole space, create scenes, etc.

As you play different characters, turn or move your body to indicate their relative position in the dialogue. Use different areas of the space to create various locations: my childhood home might be downstage right; biking into the schoolyard might use all the space further upstage; then when I confront the scary school I might stand downstage center, looking up.

**Focus on telling moments; let the broader narrative go.** There is a tendency among storytellers to try to include too much—e.g., if I'm telling you how I got married, I'd be tempted to include how I met my wife, the entire wedding day, and what happened afterward. Not only does this take too long, but I end up glossing over truly interesting details. It is more powerful to pick one or two "telling" moments to slow down and bring to life in detail, rather than attempt to convey the entire narrative. For example, I might choose the moment, early in the morning, when a procession of Buddhist monks entered my wife's home in Northern Thailand where the ceremony was to take place. Then I might jump to a moment during the ceremony where I was in such pain from kneeling, surrounded by 100 wedding guests, that I did not know what to do. The skill of the storyteller is to home in on these key moments and drop into them, feeling them fully, conveying the essential sensory, emotional, and character details.



Note that it's always OK in a story to jump in time and/or space. Connecting disparate moments can use a minimum of narration, e.g. "The monks sit on cushions along one wall of the living room. A half hour later, the ceremony has begun. Orapin and I, kneeling, are surrounded by 100 guests..."

**Be aware of the emotional arc.** The emotional arc of the story is the journey we're taking the audience on, which is not necessarily a simple arc: it could be a complex shape with many peaks and valleys, twists and turns.

Congruity is key to conveying changes in emotion, tone, or energy. If there's a joyful moment in the story, is that showing on my face and body, and through the tone of my voice? Do I tend to smile during serious passages, undermining the intensity of the story? Etc. And behind that congruity, can I actually *feel* the emotions as they change in my story? If I can feel the emotions, my audience likely will, too.

**Trust your intuition and take poetic license.** Human memory is filled with gaps. You may not remember exactly what happened, in what sequence, what a particular day was like, people's names, etc. You may even forget how the story actually ends.

We must acknowledge that every story is completely subjective: it is told through the eyes of the storyteller. For that reason, no story is “true” and every story is “true,” in the sense that it captures the storyteller's truth.

Trust yourself and your intuitive sense of what happened. As a storyteller you have complete license to fill in the gaps in a way that feels true to you. Aim for truth, but do not be attached to the precise accuracy of every detail of your story.

**Discover how the story needs to end.** Rather than plan the ending, let yourself discover the ending that feels right to you, today. Saying less, rather than more, is often the most powerful choice. An ending can be a satisfying resolution, but it can also be a cliffhanger that leaves the audience wanting more. Trust that if you say less, the audience will fill in the bigger canvas for themselves.

## Feedback and Coaching

What's most important when offering feedback or coaching for the storyteller is to do it mindfully, with awareness of what the storyteller needs. When in doubt, it's OK to ask the storyteller what kind of feedback he would like, if any. If he is open, the facilitator in a workshop context can ask the group two questions:

***“What did you see and hear?”*** This question is designed to invite the group to be witnesses in an authentic movement sense, mirroring back moments from the story—not only words but also physical and vocal aspects. This is helpful for the storyteller, to

reflect back on what he just did, and to get a sense of which moments stood out for the audience.

*“What resonated personally for you?”* This question invites “psychodramatic sharing” from the group: “how does the story relate to your own life?” Responses will likely include feelings as well as life moments—the latter ideally shared succinctly (if not, the facilitator can remind the group to keep their responses to the point). For a storyteller who just shared something personal and vulnerable with the group, having the group respond in kind is deeply validating, helping him reconnect with and feel the emotional support of the group.

Some storytellers may also want technical feedback from the facilitator/group regarding how they told their story, what worked well and what could have been better. Others may want coaching on how to go further with the story to explore a personal edge, or thoughts on incorporating the material into another artistic endeavor, such as a one-person show.

## Variations

### Dream-telling

Telling a dream is just like telling a personal story: do not announce it’s a dream or begin by showing yourself asleep. Instead, treat it as a real-life story; it’s happening now. As with any story, don’t be afraid to fill in gaps in the dream by following your intuition.

## Duet Storytelling

Two storytellers stand, facing the audience. Neither knows anything about the other's story. They begin simultaneously with vertical and horizontal moments. One steps forward and begins her story. When she comes to a pause in her story, the other steps forward and begins his. They alternate in this way, using the other's pause as a signal.

Although one typically freezes while the other is speaking, it can also be interesting to continue the physical action of a scene in silence. If one storyteller interrupts the other, the first storyteller should take that as a cue that either they've been speaking too long, or that the other storyteller's story has a moment that fits well at this point, and should pause/freeze to make space for the other.

The storytellers may be affected by each other's story, which is fine. What makes this performance structure more than the sum of its parts is the awareness and ability of the two storytellers to incorporate parallel moments, language, and energy—how one story can echo or contrast the other in surprising ways. It is important not to try to force something to happen, but to simply be aware of the possibility of interaction or of resonance with the other's story, and if the opportunity arises, to let it happen.

When both storytellers remain open and aware, but also true to their own story, this exercise can at times evoke an almost magical sense of resonance, even synchronicity.

## Other Variations: Amplified Story, Sung Story, etc.

Other techniques mentioned in Part II of this book approach storytelling in creative ways, and are particularly effective for stretching the expressive range of the storyteller. In an Amplified Story, the storyteller tells her story as normal, but is doing the

Amplification exercise “in the background,” amplifying what is happening in her body and voice. In a Sung Story, everything is sung, including the narration and what different characters say—the result can be a mini-musical, an opera, or a rap dialogue. (See the chapters on *Amplification* and *Singing* for more on these approaches).

### Applications

Storytelling can be one ingredient—a main ingredient—in developing a theater piece such as a one-person show. Over the years I have helped develop many theater pieces based on personal stories, including Jean-Claude van Itallie’s plays *Guys Dreamin’* (with Court Dorsey and Kermit Dunkelberg) and *War, Sex, and Dreams*; Eda Roth’s *Looking for the New World: a Shtetl Girl’s Journey in America*, and my own one-man shows *A Naked Man in Boston* and *Meditate on Dying*. As a drama therapist, I have also used storytelling with clients to help them develop their own self-revelatory theater pieces. (See *Part IV* of this book for more on these applications of storytelling.)

### Further Reading

Van Itallie, J. (1997). *The playwright’s handbook*. New York: Applause.