

# The Power of Your Story

By Jenifer Strauss

For The Michigan Dispatch

A publication of MIAPSRS, a chapter of USpra, an Association of organizations and individuals dedicated to promoting and supporting Recovery and Rehabilitation for persons with mental illness.

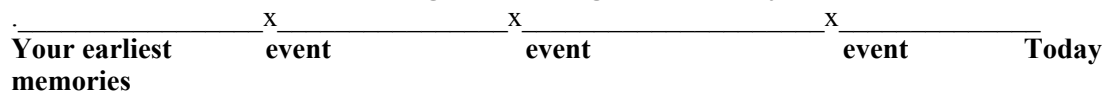
***“When you tell a story that touches me, you give me the gift of human attention—the kind that connects me to you, that touches my heart and makes me feel more alive.” (From The Story Factor by Annette Simmons).***

Human beings have one very important and powerful thing in common. From the time we begin to communicate or express ourselves, we share our lives in story. In fact, current brain research indicates that human beings think, learn, and remember in narrative or story. We share stories informally each day, about the people who are important to us, the places that hold memories, and the events or turning that have had impact or meaning in our lives.

I make my living telling stories to help people learn, heal, and connect. Lately, I have been paying attention to the stories that people tell about themselves. When I ask them about their life, how do they answer? What part of their life story do they choose to share? What part of their story are they leaving out? Are their stories about limitations or are they about possibilities? Are they telling their whole story?

Our stories are a vast accumulation of experiences that we have had along the continuum of our life’s journey so far. Our lives are one long, changing story. We can stop at many points along that continuum and find a story about an experience that impacted our lives. Each stop is like a portal, or a “door” that can be opened to a story that will give us new insights about ourselves. Think of three things that have happened to you in your life so far, from the time you began remembering, to this very day. What are three important or impacting events you have experienced? Could you tell a story about each of these events? How did these particular events cause you to grow, learn or change?

## ***Choosing Stories along a Personal Life Continuum***



Some of the stories we tell about ourselves are joyful. Some are sad. Some are painful, and some are full of hope and inspiration.

Some of our “story doors” take courage to open. Some we may not be ready to open until later. Each of us has a whole story, and telling our personal stories, can help us see our lives as whole. Listening to the stories that others tell, can do the same, for us and for them.

For those of us dealing with the challenges of mental illness, our story can start to feel heavy and lopsided. And so, the recovery stories that we tell should include all the facets of who we are. Not just our challenges with mental illness, but our joys and successes too. Recovering from mental illness is not our whole story but it is an important part of our story.

There are many ways to find and tell our stories. When I give workshops on “*Telling Our Story*” I use explorative activities to help participants identify the most meaningful and important aspects of their lives, and the most memorable events. Here is just one activity that you can try.

Create “**Your Own Personal Top Twelve**”. Take a piece of paper and number it 1-12. Everything you write on your list is a potential story. Write down three *things that you love to do*. Now write down three *people* who are important to you, who have impacted your life. Next, write down three *places* that hold memories for you. Finally, write down three ways to *describe who you are* by completing the prompt, I am a \_\_\_\_\_ (some examples could be but are not limited to sister, brother, friend, painter, listener, quiet, outgoing, honest, spiritual etc...person).

When you finish generating the list, look at each item and ask yourself, “*is there a story about that?*” I think you will start to see that our lives are made up of a series of experiences that are connected and can be shared in story. As we continue to grow, learn and change, so do our stories.

Your “**Own Personal Top Twelve**” list will always be changing. When we try something new, meet a new person who impacts our lives, or have the courage to venture out to a new place we have never been, we add experiences to our life continuum and can describe “*who we are or who we are becoming*” in new ways.

So for those in recovery, why is it important to share our stories? I believe that when we know and tell our own story, we understand ourselves better. When we listen to and witness the stories that others tell, we give them the gift of deep listening, so that they can understand their lives better. Since, our life experience is mirrored in the stories that others tell, we see that we are not alone. Stories build bridges from one person to another and create a sense of connection and

compassion between us. Telling our recovery story helps us see our journey more clearly, gives others in recovery strength and hope, and is a powerful tool for creating a greater understanding about mental health issues. It is said that “the truth clothed in a story is easier to hear”.

### **Why Tell Our Story?**

1. The stories that we share from our life experience speaks to the truth about living with, and recovering from mental illness.
2. Our stories can help break through the stigma about the causes of mental illnesses by breaking down barriers of ignorance, prejudice and unfair discrimination, and promoting education, awareness and action.
3. Our stories can be a powerful advocacy tool that helps create policy and protects against the abuse of rights and mistreatment of consumers.
4. Telling our story, and listening to the stories of others in recovery, can promote our healing and the healing of our peers.

### **Suggestions for Consumers:**

- Use storytelling and story writing activities with peer groups, or in your Club House settings to support and empower each other. Make it a weekly or monthly event.
- Speak to groups of adolescents who are dealing with mental health issues to mentor them in recovery.
- Write your story and post it on a blog, or place your story on other mental health related posts.
- Send your story to magazines, newsletters, or publications that print recovery stories that others can read and benefit from.
- Create an inspiring story piece for You Tube!

### **Suggestions for Mental Health Providers and Recipient Rights Advocates**

- Use narrative writing and telling as a healing tool for those you provide mental health care for.
- Provide a listening space for your clients in group therapy so individual’s stories can be heard in a safe, supportive environment.
- Involve family members of consumers in story telling and story listening sessions to help create awareness and understanding.
- Ask consumers to share stories, or use stories, with permission, to help dissolve stigma, create policy, and advocate for the protection of rights for mental health care recipients.

In his book, *“Listening for True Treasures in the Wind”*, author Ron Collins says, “When we take our time and focus on our fellow human beings and give of ourselves, we can truly connect our inner core with another inner core. It is empowering... True listening connects living souls, enhances healing, reduces loneliness, empowers, and impacts all of our lives in the most positive ways... The person you come across can be impacted by the true listening you give to them. Both of our lives can be impacted in ways you can only imagine due to the gift of true listening”.

When we know where we have come from and understand our past “story”, we can understand our present story with greater clarity. Our present story can be one of possibilities, not limitations, for the most powerful way to connect with other human beings, at the core, is to tell and listen to each other’s stories.

---

---

*Jenifer Strauss is a keynote speaker, storyteller, and workshop facilitator from Hastings. A mental health care consumer, she is currently pursuing a master’s degree in Counseling Psychology, and serves on the MIAPSRs Board. Jenifer can be reached at [jenifer@storybetold.com](mailto:jenifer@storybetold.com).*