

## How to Tell Stories

“A story is a ritual map to a territory of the soul”—Martín Prechtel

Humans tell stories naturally, yet the lack of storytellers in our communities today can make storytelling seem not only unusual but like something very difficult to do. In fact this is far from the truth. We all have the ability to tell stories, though our dependence on film and television leaves us with few opportunities to use this ability. For this reason, a basic guide to telling stories can be helpful. The notes below are a distillation of ideas I've heard over the years from many different storytellers, foremost among them being Ben Haggarty, who I studied with in the spring of 2019.

The process of learning to tell a story has essentially three steps:

1. Find a story you like.
2. Read it three times and set it aside.
3. Tell the story in your own words.

Stories come to us in mysterious ways, and often it can be difficult to say if we choose them or if they choose us. Nevertheless, a good starting point is this: find a story you like. This is a process of listening both to the story and to yourself. Does some detail of the story stick with you, or resonate in some way? If so, that is often a sign that you should tell it. This doesn't mean that you need to understand or even like the entire story at first. Traditional stories come to us from a long way off, both in time and in space, and to enter such a story is to enter a different culture. For this reason, some amount of confusion, especially at the beginning, can be a good sign; and, as when tracking an animal, patience is essential.

Reading a story repeatedly allows you to learn its pattern. Once you've done that, you must set aside the language by which the story came to you and tell it in your own words. For the story is not the words; the story is what happens. This is the secret of storytelling's vitality, for language that is open to change is free to respond to the audience, the weather, the time of day, and every other rowdy variable of life. This makes storytelling the most flexible, collaborative, and therefore liberating of art forms.

A final point to keep in mind is this: you learn to tell stories by telling stories. Book-learning is important, as is the study of the land and culture from which the story originates; but ultimately you will learn the most about a story by telling it, by noticing the response of a live audience to each particular event. When does laughter come, or sorrow, or boredom or fear? Only a live audience can instruct you in this. For this reason experience is crucial, and can be even more important than preparation.

To tell a traditional story is to enter a community of voices many thousands of years old. It is to make the unseen both present and real; it is to court connection not only with the future and the deep past but with worlds of nature and the spirit. Some joyful and fearless part of you knows how to do this, and has always known. You must simply take a deep breath and begin.