



Storytelling with adults who have  
severe and profound learning  
disabilities

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# What stories do for us

making sense



who we are



possibilities





The creation myth is the story that enacts the creative power of stories, the many narratives that are going on in us all the time, and in which we live. Scheherazade, herself a story, tells tales to you non-stop to keep you awake, and thereby saves your life as well as her own. *Don Cupitt, 1991*

Robin Meader,  
Artistic Director, Unlimited  
Company 2005



**What I like about it, is that it's a really good story about how he started off as a poor washing boy, and it reminded me of when I was young.**

# The work of stories

- Sense of identity
- Friendship
- Community
- Emotional well being
- Understanding and learning
- Fun

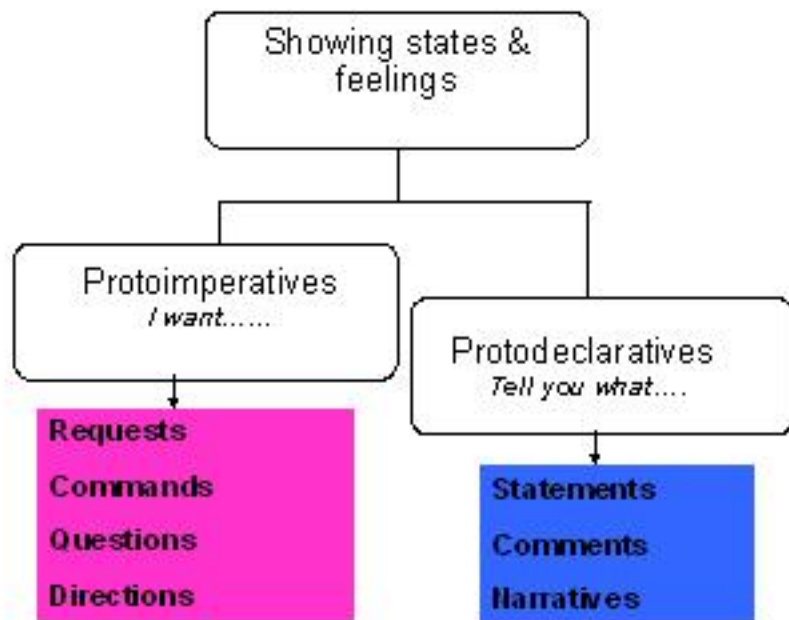
# QUESTION

- My friend has this book and someone writes in it what he's done like going swimming, for his mum to read. Is that a story?
- **Self advocate at IASSID CONFERENCE 2004**

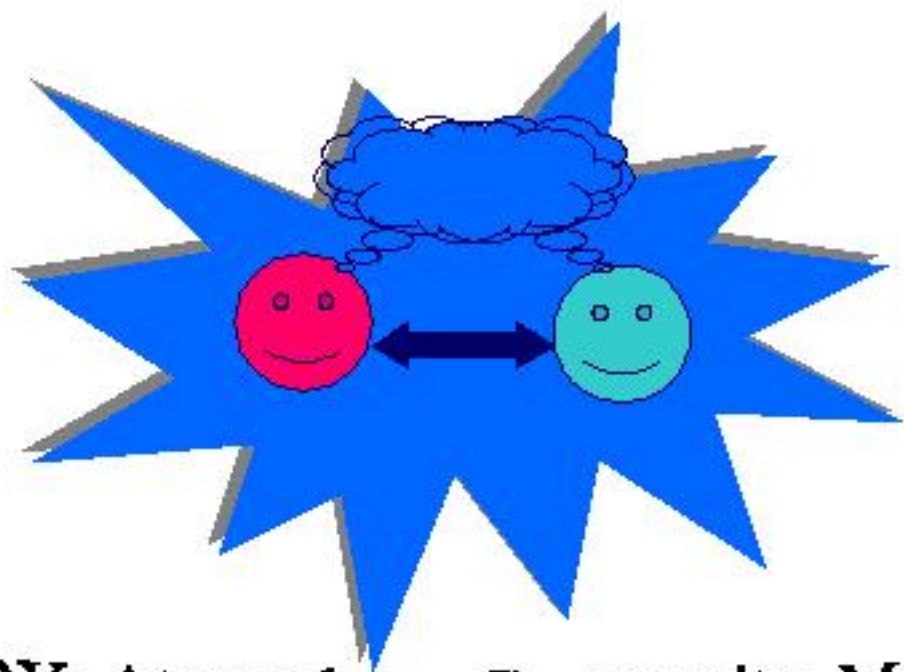
# What is a story?

- A memory
- Of an event
- That is out of the ordinary
- That gives rise to a feeling
- And that you want to tell someone else

# Early Communication

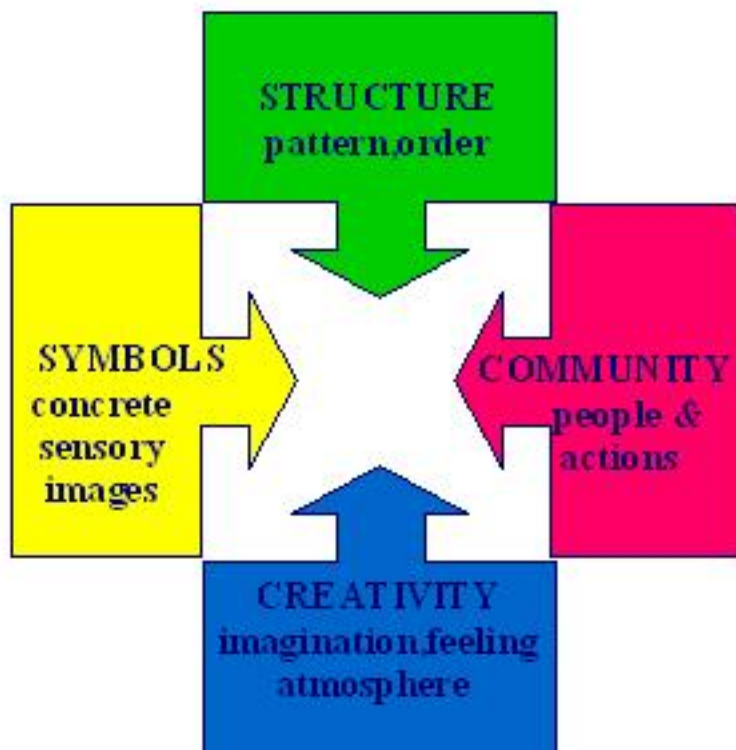






**STORY: Atmosphere, Community, Meaning**

# How do stories make meaning?



# How stories work

The sentences in narratives open up neural pathways facilitating new sequences of excitation which one day we may have occasion to make use of, perhaps in forming an action of our own, or in interpreting someone's behaviour... what gets imprinted is something like a melody or a chain of feelings, which is built up and rounded off. What we remember, and are reminded of, is the emotional flavour or colouring of a previous sequence which has now been reactivated...

*Cupitt, 1991:39*

# Stories and patterns

Living creatures go to considerable pains to escape equality, to evade entropy, chaos and old night. They arrange things. They make sense, literally. Molecule by molecule. In the cell. The cells arrange themselves. The body is an arrangement in space time, a patterning, a process. Order, pattern, connect. Do we have any better way to organise such wildly disparate experiences as a half remembered crocodile, a dead great-aunty, the smell of coffee, a scream from Iran, a bumpy landing and a hotel room in Cincinnati, than the narrative? An immensely flexible technology or life strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with that most fascinating of all serials, the Story of my Life... Le Guin, 1980

# PROJECT

- 6 people with profound disabilities
- Participated in a weekly storytelling group
- Individual stories about key events developed

# Interviews

- 5 mothers, one friend
- Questions
  - What stories are told?
  - How constructed?
- Key transitional events
  - (McAdams, 1993)

# Analysis

- Reference to past events
  - Habitual or unique events
- Story structure
  - sequence of 2 or more events
  - reactions of protagonists
  - location in space and time
  - information about meaning or emotional impact
  - High point - climax of story where meaning is located

# Results

- 84 references to past events
- 58% single, unelaborated
  - » *They been on a barge*
  - » *He caught chickenpox in hospital*
  - » *She used to have long hair*
- 18% linked habitual (15)
- 24% linked specific (20)
  - 13/20 storied
  - Linked, specific past, evaluated



## Personal narratives told in interview by parents of adults with profound disabilities

	Past Habitual		Specific		High Pt		Eval Story	
Shahela	10	1	2	0	3	2		
Kim	10	2	1	0	4	1		
Dan	7	2	2	1	4	2		
Cathy	27	3	7	0	9	3		
Alan	30	7	8	4	14	5		
<b>Totals</b>		<b>84</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>13</b>	

# Stories

. When he was little, with eggs. I thought, right. I made him I got a rice pudding and I split it into two dishes, and I poached an egg and I got the yolk out of the egg and put it in one - this was how I was going to get him onto eggs, you see - and one plain. Started with the plain one, and that was going down fine, I took a spoon out of the other dish, didn't see him - put it to his mouth, and ...(makes a face of spitting it out). He got the taste of - (x) so I went back to the plain one, he ate that one up. But it took a long long time to get it onto eggs. (ALAN)

Because the sad thing is...ok, when they're at school- when they was at school, Dan had hearing tests, he had hearing aids, he had speech therapy, we had swimming, he come to nineteen, I had a letter, please would you send his hearing aids back. From the Town Hall. They- would I send them back. .And from that day, unless I took him myself anywhere, he's never had his hearing tested. You're switched off. You're in a big old world. (DAN)

# Images in Life Story Book

	Photos	Pictures	Artefacts
1. <i>Early life</i>	19	0	1 card
2. <i>Previous residence</i>	54	0	Ticket to concert
3. <i>People I live with</i>	21	0	0
4. <i>School and college</i>		25	0 drawings + brief journal entries
5. <i>Holidays</i>	33	0	2 postcards 1 brochure
6. <i>Likes and dislikes</i>	12	28	Collection of Christmas and birthday cards from the family

(NAZREEN)

## Reasons for lack of stories

- Language and communication difficulties
- Need for routine
- Painful memories
- Withdrawal of opportunities for reportable events
- Lack of time

# Implications

- Recall of experience
- Limits to active identity construction
- Restriction of conversational opportunities
- Restriction of activities

# How does narrative develop?

## **Cognitive model**

- Consequence of maturation
  - Memory, language
- Intrapersonal focus
- Ages 3-7

## **Social model**

- Learned through scaffolded participation
- Interpersonal focus
- Ages 9m on

# How to tell a story

## Stage One

- Find the reportable experience
- Make it salient
  - Sensory cues
  - Speech cues
  - feelings

# How to tell a story

## *Stage 1 alternative*

- Get the story
  - *Interview*
  - *Questions*
  - *Identify cues*



# How to tell a story

## Stage 2

- Record the story
- Make the record one that is owned by the person
- Collect props and illustrations

# How to tell a story

## Stage 3

- Rehearse and practise
- Decide who will tell what part of the story
- Go over it together

# How to tell a story

## Stage 4

- Find a new listener
- Tell the story
  - Collaborate & support
  - Cueing and sentence completion

# Questions for collaborative storytellers

- What is the story?
  - Deciding which narrative to tell
- What does it mean?
  - Deciding why to tell it, Deciding the high point
- How can we tell it?
  - What style of storytelling? What resources?
- Who does what?
  - What contributions can everyone make ?

## A culture of story in your centres

- *Telling and listening to stories are a regular part of daily conversation*
- *Everyone is involved*
- *Reportable events are foregrounded*

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Waller, A. & O'Mara, D. (2003) Aided communication and the development of personal narrative *AAC* 11,256-271

- Storytracks: [www.storytracks.com](http://www.storytracks.com)
- Bag Books: [bagbooks@appleonline.net](mailto:bagbooks@appleonline.net)
- Society for Storytelling [www.sfs.org.uk](http://www.sfs.org.uk)

Big Macks [www.liberator.com](http://www.liberator.com)

Story/Symbol Packs

[www.callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk/aacres/oures](http://www.callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk/aacres/oures)

Storysacks <http://www.storysack.com>

Bag Books <http://www.bagbooks.org>

60 Walham Grove, London SW6 1QR.

The Real Lives: Real Stories Project

<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/namis/projects/seniors.htm>

Symbol world. Lots of stories in symbol form, on a very accessible

website <http://www.symbolworld.org>



# The Memory Experience

- Children do have memories preverbally but cannot express them
- When given an experience at 2 and asked to recall it 6 months later, children use the words they had available at the time
- Children can act out what they recall behaviourally
- Adults actively scaffold children's memories

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/memory/>