

**GREETINGS TO THE VIRTUAL STORYTELLING CONFERENCE  
(16TH-17TH MAY 2020) FROM GRAHAM WILLIAMS IN CAPE  
TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA**



I focus on using story, imagery, metaphor, archetype, anecdote as a contributor to higher organisational performance. My web site is <http://www.haloandnoose.com> where you can (at the bottom of the home page) subscribe to a free monthly newsletter that addresses many aspects of story ... <sup>1</sup>

It's great to be linking up with new story teller friends. The Virtual Storytelling Conference is sure to be a wonderful enlightening, enlivening and bonding event. I am so looking forward to it!

Cape Town people share with all other people the fact that story is part of our DNA. Each of us is much more than a single story. We are all born a blank page and die a library.

*A farmer's horse runs away. His neighbour commiserates, "How terrible".  
"You never can tell," the farmer retorts.*

*The next day the horse returns with a wild horse. His neighbour responds, "How wonderful". "You never can tell," the farmer says.*

*The third day the farmer's son rides the wild horse. The horse throws him and he breaks his leg. The neighbour laments, "How terrible". "You never can tell," is the farmer's refrain.*

*On the fourth day the soldiers recruit all the able-bodied men for the war. But they leave the son with the broken leg. And the neighbour says... and the farmer responds...*



In South Africa we have an indigenous social value system called *Ubuntu* that we should put into practice far more than we do. (The word, *Ubuntu*, is from the Xhosa people and language.) *Ubuntu* means, everyone counts. No single finger on a hand can pick up a grain of rice. We are totally interconnected and need each other. I am me because of we. In an *Ubuntu* conversation circle, every person speaks and is held in the group's space, and is recognised as having great worth.

The Covid-19 pandemic is demonstrating that we all share the same air, fears, hopes, joy, and are inextricably interconnected - part of the web of life where we can reach out and share our stories. Lockdowns and regulations have quickly stimulated a new work-from-home norm, and we are able to reach out to each other in virtual space. That makes this upcoming virtual storytelling conference so important.

The coronavirus has thrust upon us the unknown and uncertain. We are like the person in David Caspar Friedrich's 200-hundred-year-old painting:

*Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*



We don't know what obstacles and adventure lie ahead of us, nor is our future clear. But we do know that people are far more important than processes and technology and that we can use these to build our common humanity through virtual story.

I've noticed during the first month of lock-down and work-from-home in Cape Town, that people are telling three types of story:

- *The victim* (This isn't fair. I am glued to the news in the hope of hearing that this thing will go away. I feel swamped by all the opinions, people trying to assert themselves, 'noise'. Why me when my business was only just beginning to take off? Most of my time is spent worrying about money, relationships and people I may not see again, and even death ....)
- *The copier/ survivor*. (I'm enjoying the extra time I have because I don't have to travel. These new possibilities – Zoom, Loom for example – are great opportunities to learn new skills, make new friends. I'm adapting and am usually more positive than negative)
- *The person who thrives, flourishes*. At every level there is benefit. Physical, emotional, intellectual, social, 'spiritual'. This new world will only get better. There is opportunity to refine my purpose and values and really give to others compassionately)

So, what is again being highlighted is that different people react very differently to massive change, threat and adversity. We are on different growth stages and development paths. And the need to listen to each other's stories is vital. In the days ahead, we need to see each other through, and not see through each other.

We are faced with the possibility of ever-widening circles of connection – like the circles that follow throwing a stone into a still pond. Marvellous!

As we enter more deeply into our new, more virtual world we are in a position to counter stories that erect walls between people, and divide, misinform, polarise. Instead we can build bridges with our stories. Bridges across the divides of age, ethnicity, gender, culture, tradition, ways of thinking ... Tell stories that forge bonds, heal, and don't hurt, harm or separate. Stories that are designed to express – not impress!

This traffic light system, which I developed with American story practitioner friend Terrence Gargiulo, may assist as a checklist of our authenticity and intent:

## What Is Your Intention?



**Potentially Dangerous Zone**

Convince   Persuade   Gain sympathy   Impress   Sell   Win   Urge to act

**Neutral Zone**

Entertain   Engage   Capture interest   Suspend disbelief   Perform

**Positive Zone**

Illuminate   Make sense of   Illustrate   Share   Bring understanding  
 Recreate memory   Convey insight   Encourage   Research   Affirm  
 Transfer information, knowledge, wisdom   Raise awareness   Bring hope  
 Foster mindfulness   Connect people   Cause reflection   Bring healing  
 Elicit different viewpoints   Cultivate listening   Trigger the imagination  
 Invoke curiosity, innovation   Stimulate meaningful, bonding conversation  
 Promote reframing, positive change, transformation

At a time when I was quite involved with developing customer contact centres we used to say that we could *hear* when the person at the other end of the telephone line was smiling. And as a Lifeline counsellor we learned to listen with sensitivity and empathy.

***In this brave new world of virtual storytelling if there is one, single skill that story practitioners need to latch onto, and develop fully, it is this: to harness the power of listening.***

Silence can be therapeutic. Listening to another is, as theologian Paul Tillich says, an act of love. By listening we show the other that they have value, self-worth.

But the truth of the matter is that our willingness, ability and practice of listening is largely undeveloped. Author Ernest Hemingway wisely said that we

should, *"When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen"*. Typically, we pretend to listen, listen selectively, sometimes with bored expression and glassy-eyes. At other times we use red –flag- listening (where a word or phrase will push a button, trigger an emotion in ourselves, skew our understanding and interpretation, unleash argument); or opportunistic listening (waiting for the right moment to jump in with our own viewpoints). Or we don't really listen but instead focus our minds on analysing the speaker. Or we lapse into inappropriate daydreaming.

Deep listening means unconditional positive regard for the other.

Deep listening means becoming attuned to the verbal and non-verbal, thoughts and feelings.

Deep listening means listening with ears, eyes, mind and heart.

So I leave you to contemplate what I'm told are the elements of the Chinese symbol for listening:



*"The branches of your intelligence grow new leaves in the wind of listening".*  
(Rumi. Sufi mystic and poet)

CAPE TOWN  
26<sup>th</sup> April, 2020

Note:

1) The title, "The Halo and the Noose," is derived from this statement by Dan McKinnon: "A halo has to fall only a few inches to be a noose." We allow our stories to liberate, enhance, and uplift -- or to strangle, imprison, and snuff out -- life.