



Why Your Story Needs a Pet-the-Dog Scene

A Hollywood screenwriting trick may give your narrative just what it's missing.

Stories are powerful because they can engage our imaginations, taking us to places we've never been and allowing us to feel part of experiences we may never have. But this extraordinary sense of transport happens only when we identify with one or more of the characters within the narrative. Suddenly, we see the world through their eyes and feel like the events are happening to us. And whether we are thrilled or scared, angered or amused, one way or another we are *moved*.

This process of *identification*, which is so crucial to the success of stories, poses a particular challenge for many public interest storytellers. In their stories, they frequently present protagonists with whom it is very difficult for the average person to identify: ex-felons, drug addicts, prostitutes, kids running wild. Even when these stories are headed towards happy endings, the individuals we meet at the start often appear as unsympathetic characters living far outside our own experiences.

I witnessed this phenomenon recently while running a storytelling workshop for the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH). The purpose of the workshop was to train twenty "Supportive Housing Community Advocates" - men and women who had successfully broken through their own cycles of homelessness, and who were being prepared to tell their stories here in southern California.



Almost all of the advocates instinctively started their stories in the same place - the streets. Some described being newly released from prison, others talked of prostitution and drug use, and all mentioned the perils of life on city streets. The audiences to whom they would eventually tell these stories would include potential donors, and while these listeners would certainly *understand* the difficult circumstances described, it's unlikely they would *identify* with them.

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Why Your Story Needs a Pet-the-Dog Scene

It may be exactly what's missing.

Better Webinars in One Hour

Learn how on January 17



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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As I listened to their first drafts, I was reminded of an old storytelling tip attributed to Paddy Chayevsky, the legendary American playwright, screenwriter and novelist. Chayevsky said that if you wanted your audience to like the hero of your story, you have to give him a "pet-the-dog" scene early in the narrative - i.e., show him doing something that clearly proves he's a good person.



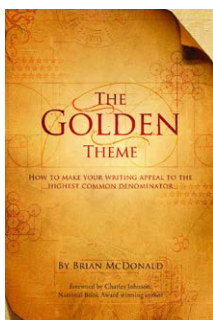
Many screenwriters have taken this tip literally, and if you start looking for it, you'll be surprised how often you'll see characters actually petting dogs somewhere in act one. ("Fruitvale Station" is a recent example - just look for the scene where Oscar Grant encounters a stray dog at a

gas station.) But whether the interpretation is literal or figurative, the principle is sound, and for the CSH storytellers, it was exactly the help their stories needed.

As they worked on their second drafts, I encouraged them to consider starting at a different point in their lives - a time *before* they were homeless, struggling with drugs and alcohol, incarcerated, or had any other negative tags hanging on them. A time when they were just a person like any of us, with hopes and dreams and their whole lives still ahead of them. Let your audience meet someone with whom they can identify, I told them, *before* you give them a label that can become a barrier between you and them.

When they took the advice, the difference in their storytelling was palpable. Lawrence, one of the advocates, told us about being raised in Cleveland by a single mother who gave all her attention to his sister who had cerebral palsy. He confessed to feeling ignored and unwanted at a young and tender age, and as I said to him during the workshop, who among us hasn't experienced similar feelings at some point?

Ruby, who came from Amarillo, Texas told us she was the seventh of nine children. When she got pregnant at age 17, she was thrilled to finally have something that her older sisters couldn't take away from her, something that was truly hers. What could have been just another story of an unwed teen mother with overwhelming responsibilities ended up tugging at the heartstrings of everyone in the room.

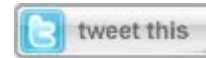


In his book, *The Golden Theme*, storytelling guru Brian McDonald asserts that all stories have a common message: *we are all the same*. "Stories could not work if the Golden Theme were not true," writes McDonald. "It is our ability to imagine ourselves in story circumstances that makes stories work."

As you develop your next story, take a closer look at the characters in your narrative with whom you want your audience to identify.



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Before your audience sees them as homeless, at-risk, or a victim of any kind, let them see a person just like themselves. Give your hero a pet-the-dog scene, and open a door into your story that anyone can enter.

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Better Webinars in One Hour

Join our "Webinar on Webinars" on January 17 and find out why a good webinar may be more like talk radio than anything else.

When I first started attending webinars, I was probably just as bored as you. But as the host/teacher droned on, I started to notice a few things. Having worked in talk radio earlier in my career, I started to see distinct similarities between the webinar format and a talk radio show.

Later on, as I began developing webinars to teach at The Goodman Center, I incorporated some of the principles that have been proven to make talk radio engaging. As a result, our webinars receive consistently high marks, and good causes that frequently conduct webinars of their own have asked me to teach these techniques to them.

We've condensed those lessons into a one-hour class open to the public. In "The Webinar on Webinars", you'll learn:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- The fine details of creating a good online experience
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What else we learned from talk radio that makes webinars even better



Tuition for "The Webinar on Webinars" is \$125 per student, and discounts are available when organizations register three or more. To learn more and to register online for our January 17th class (11a-12n PT, 2-3p ET), [click here](#).

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