



The Black Box: Is Your Story Trapped Inside?

Her name was Sherry. She ran a shelter for victims of domestic violence in Central Florida, and she told me a story I'll never forget. Actually, it's the *second* draft of her story that stays with me even to this day. The *first* draft, which Sherry shared during a storytelling workshop I was leading in Orlando, got off to a good start, but then it ran smack into one of the most common problems I see whenever nonprofits tell stories about their work: the Black Box. [Full Story](#) Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

Coming in July: Two-Day Communications Master Class

For the first time ever, The Goodman Center will be offering a two-day workshop focused on storytelling and presenting as leadership skills. "Telling Your Story: A Master Class for Nonprofit Leaders" has been developed in partnership with the Southern California Center for Nonprofit Management and will be held in Los Angeles on July 16th and 17th at the California Community Foundation.

If you've never participated in any of our workshops or webinars, this intensive class will give you a solid grounding in telling personal stories, organizational stories, and delivering those stories (and more) in your presentations. And for those who have participated before, it will give you the opportunity to build on that experience and take your communications skills to a new level.

Registration will open later this month, **we will accept only 75 participants**, and we're expecting to sell out quickly. Details are still being finalized, but if you'd like to learn more (and be among the first to receive a link when registration opens), send an email to celia@thegoodmancenter.com with the subject line "Master Class." And we hope to see you in LA this summer!



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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(The following is based on a true story. Names and some details have been changed to protect privacy.)

Her name was Sherry. She ran a shelter for victims of domestic violence in Central Florida. And she told me a story I'll never forget. Actually, it's the *second* draft of her story that stays with me even to this day. The *first* draft, which Sherry shared during a storytelling workshop I was leading in Orlando, got off to a good start, but then it ran smack into one of the most common problems I see whenever nonprofits tell stories about their work: the Black Box.

Here's the first version of the story Sherry shared that day: Joan, a thirty-something mother of two, was a repeat visitor to the shelter. Each time she would arrive with her 6-year old daughter, Tara, and 4-year old son, Jake, in tow, she was an emotional wreck as a result of her husband's latest explosion.

And during each stay, Sherry would try to convince Joan to leave her husband and start a new life, but Joan always had an excuse for going back. "He was just drunk," Joan would say. "He didn't mean it." "I don't know how I could do this without him."

Sherry had heard all these lines before, but through patience, perseverance and compassion, she and her team at the shelter were eventually able to reach Joan, help her extricate herself from a dangerous situation, and begin a new life for herself and her children. The End.

Now, at first blush, this may feel like a pretty good story. In Joan, Sherry gives us a sympathetic character to pull us into the narrative, and there's clearly a positive outcome demonstrating the efficacy of the shelter's work. But take a closer look and ask yourself: exactly *how* did the shelter help Joan? The answer is hiding inside a black box. It's hiding behind words such as "patience," "perseverance," and "compassion," which are lovely, but don't really paint a picture. If we can't see what's happening in our mind's eye, we won't *feel* anything. And it's the feelings we remember first when we remember a story.

So on the spot that day, I pointed out the black box and asked Sherry, "What really happened? How did you turn Joan around?"

"Well," she began, "there was one day when I asked Tara and Jake to go play in the kids area while I talked to their Mom. The area was set-up with a kids' sized kitchen with a plastic stove, cabinets, table and chairs."

"Tara took out a black plastic pan and mimed preparing breakfast. She put plastic bacon and eggs in the pan, and after a few minutes of shuffling them back and forth, she poured them onto a plate and held it out for her little brother. Jake looked at the plate for a second and then slapped it out of her hands. And he said, 'It's cold, bitch.'"

"Tara didn't cry. She just knelt down quietly, picked up the eggs, bacon and pan, and started preparing breakfast all over again. Her Mom saw all of this, and in that moment, the full extent of the damage that her husband was doing was finally clear to her."

So, *now* do you begin to get an idea of how this shelter does what it does? Clearly, there is much more to this story, but when Sherry started opening up that black box, she gave us a chance to see and feel and, most importantly, remember. And now it's your turn: take a closer look at your organization's stories, and ask yourself if the essential aspects of your work are hiding in a black box. If so, start writing your new draft, and see what happens when you pry open that box. It may not be pretty. It may even be hard to share. But it's what your audience needs to hear.



This article was originally written for [Hatch](#), an online resource to help you use storytelling more strategically and drive change more effectively.

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Want to Avoid the Black Box?

The Black Box is one of the ten most common mistakes we see in storytelling during our workshops and webinars. If you'd like to learn how to avoid the Black Box (as well as nine other commonly make mistakes), please join us for *Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative*, a four-week webinar starting on April 6th. To learn more, click on the storytelling class below.

Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

TELL STORIES BETTER	CAMPAIGN BETTER	PRESENT BETTER
Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative	Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter	Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes
April 6, 13, 20 & 27 9am - 10am PT	April 14 and 21 11am - 12pm PT	May 21 & 22 11am - 12pm PT



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