



# free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



## So Much Story, So Few Words

Before we begin, let's agree to leave political preferences aside for now. No matter how you feel about Elizabeth Warren, she recently provided an example of brilliant storytelling - one that *everyone* can learn from. During a CNN town hall in Jackson, Mississippi on March 18th, Jake Tapper asked Warren how her experiences growing up in Oklahoma have "shaped her life in the Senate." Warren answered with a story - what Marshall Ganz calls "[the story of self](#)" to be specific - and it was so well received that if you haven't heard it already, you probably will soon.

What most impressed me, though, was the almost magical act of miniaturization Warren performed in the telling. In less than two minutes (or 259 words if you're counting), she transported the audience across time and space with an anecdote that was vivid, self-deprecating, emotional, relatable, and most of all delivered on its last line: "Anybody who wants to know me, they've just heard the story." [Read more.](#) *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

## New Workshop on Ethical Storytelling

Most organizations agree that in order to stand out in a crowded, noisy world, they need to tell powerful, compelling stories. Unfortunately, all too often, the stories that organizations tell venture into challenging ethical waters and run the risk of alienating or unintentionally exploiting the very people they seek to serve.

To help you recognize and deal with these challenges more effectively, we've just launched a new workshop called "Ethical Storytelling: Navigating the Maze" in partnership with Michael Kass, Founder of the Center for Story and Spirit. Over the course of three hours, you will gain a greater awareness of the potential issues and unconscious biases that often go unnoticed or unmentioned in nonprofit storytelling. And by the workshop's end, you will have concrete actions, tools and techniques to ensure you are treating all your stories - and storytellers - with greater care.

For more details and to find out how we can tailor this workshop to your needs, please click [here](#).

## Bigger! Better! More Expensive!

Expanded, updated and revised, the newest edition of *Storytelling as Best Practice* is now available for order [here](#). Featuring the most popular articles from twenty years of *free-range thinking*, this booklet has been designed to help you understand why you must tell stories, how to craft memorable and persuasive stories, and how to ensure you are collecting and telling *all* the kinds of stories that will help you be more effective in your work.



### Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

#### PLAN CAMPAIGNS

Strategic  
Communications:  
Cutting Through  
the Clutter

June 20 & 21  
11am - 12pm PT

#### TELL STORIES

Storytelling:  
Tapping the Power  
of Narrative

July 8, 15, 22 & 30  
9am - 10am PT

#### GIVE PRESENTATIONS

Why Bad  
Presentations  
Happen to Good  
Causes

July 17 & 18  
11am - 12pm PT

Click on the class title to read more!

### About Us

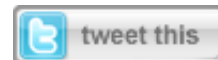
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**So Much Story, So Few Words** continued on next page.

## So Much Story, So Few Words (Cont'd)

Here is the complete text of the "story of self" Warren offered in response to Tapper's question. I've added footnotes to highlight all the things she accomplishes with so few words. (Before reading on, I strongly encourage watching Warren's delivery of the story [here](#). While the words that follow are well chosen, there is one moment in particular where words alone do not capture the emotions Warren conveys.)

I'll tell you about that. So, I have three older brothers. They all went off and joined the military.<sup>1</sup> That was their ticket to America's middle class. I was the late in life baby. My mother always just called me, "The Surprise."<sup>2</sup> And about the time I was in middle school, my daddy<sup>3</sup> had a heart attack. And it was serious. Thought he was going to die.<sup>4</sup> The church neighbors brought covered dishes.<sup>5</sup> It was a scary time.

He survived, but he couldn't go back to work. And we lost our family station wagon,<sup>6</sup> and at night I'd hear my parents talk, and that's where I learned words like "mortgage" and "foreclosure."<sup>7</sup> And I remember the day that I walked into my parents' bedroom, and laying out on the bed is "the dress."<sup>8</sup> And some people here will know the dress. It's the one that only comes out for weddings, funerals and graduations. And my mother's in her slip, stocking feet, and she's pacing back and forth and she's crying.<sup>9</sup>

She's saying, "We will not lose this house, we will not lose this house."<sup>10</sup> She was fifty years old. She never worked outside the home. She was truly terrified.<sup>11</sup> And I watched her while she finally just pulled it together, put that dress on, put on her high heels,<sup>12</sup> blew her nose and walked to the Sears<sup>13</sup> and got a minimum wage job. And that minimum wage job saved our house, but more importantly, it saved our family. Anybody who wants to know me, they've just heard the story.<sup>14</sup>



Elizabeth Warren on CNN (3.18.2019)

1. When people think of Elizabeth Warren, the first words that come to mind probably do *not* include "military family." She uses her story of self as everyone should: to define themselves through their own experiences and values, especially when others would try to define them differently.
2. In public speaking, a little self-deprecation never hurts, and Warren sprinkles in just the right amount here. Listen closely to the video and you'll hear the audience laugh when she says "The Surprise."
3. Not "father" - "daddy." This is a personal story told from the viewpoint of a little girl, not the senior senator from Massachusetts, and Warren's careful word choice reminds us of this.
4. Vulnerability is a highly desirable quality in storytelling. When characters in a story open up and share their deepest fears, they invite the audience in - to empathize with them, root for them, and care about the story's outcome. Warren doesn't mince words here: she thought she was going to lose her father. If you don't feel something for her in that moment, dial 911 immediately. Your heart has stopped working.
5. Stories live in the specifics, the seemingly small details that help us see the world the storyteller is conjuring. Consider the difference between "our friends were very supportive" and "the church neighbors brought covered dishes." Same meaning, sure, but only one immediately evokes an image.
6. Not "car" - "station wagon." (And if it was American made, it would have been even better to drop in the brand name.)
7. When Warren fights for laws protecting consumers (especially where predatory mortgage lenders are

involved), opponents have painted her as an "ivory tower academic" or a "Washington insider" who is out of touch with reality. Telling us where she first learned words like "mortgage" and "foreclosure" is Warren once again going about the business of owning her story.

8. "The dress" is so many things: it's another specific conjuring a visual in the audience's minds. It's a symbol capturing both the gravity of the immediate situation as well as the limited means of the family. It's a bridge between Warren and the audience, one that she explicitly calls out when she says "some people here will know the dress."

9. More specifics (slip, stocking feet), more emotion (pacing, crying), more vulnerability.

10. In all forms of storytelling, dialogue lets us hear the characters speak for themselves instead of having the storyteller interpret for us. It pulls us into the action and fosters a sense of immediacy - *we are there*, a proverbial fly on the wall.

11. More vulnerability, so another opportunity for us to root for a character in the story.

12. Not "shoes" - "high heels."

13. Not "a local department store" - "Sears."

14. ICYMI, Warren makes sure you know what you just heard.

Writing about Warren's town hall appearance the following day, political journalist Jill Filipovic called this part of the evening "real and righteous." The headline for her opinion piece (which appeared on CNN's website) was "Elizabeth Warren Nailed It," and if Marshall Ganz saw that story, he would probably nod his head.

In our workshops and webinars, I am often asked, "But what if I don't have a lot of time (or room) to tell a story?" To which I will now reply, "Just watch Elizabeth Warren." Political preferences aside.

[^ back to top](#)

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