

## CHAPTER TWO: DIANA TELLS HER STORY OR HOW TO PERFORM THE STORY TO SPARK CHANGE

*The future is already here. But it is very unevenly distributed.*

William Gibson<sup>19</sup>

I don't see Diana later that day.

Nor the next day.

Nor the day after that.

In fact, three days go by and I'm beginning to think that she's not coming back when, late in the afternoon, in she skips with her take-no-prisoners grin in position. There's a willful spring in her step.

She sits down at the bar without saying a thing. I'd like to know how it went. But I hardly need to ask. Her body language says everything.

"Double ferment?"

"Mineral water with a twist," she says perkily.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"Fine," she says.

I go on cleaning the wood-cups.

There is silence in the bar, but in the background a cardinal is singing.

“Go on,” she says finally. “Ask me!”

“Ask you what?”

She glares at me. “Ask me how it went.”

I continue cleaning the woodcups for a few seconds as she drinks the mineral water in a couple of swallows. I think her brain is going to burst if I don’t pop the question.

“Okay,” I say finally. “How did it go?”

“Tremendous!” she says.

“You told a story?”

“Just like you said.”

“And?”

“Suddenly they’re willing to listen!”

“Surprised?”

“I told it one-on-one to my buddies,” she says, “and they loved it. Then I tried it on a vice-president, and he got all excited. Now I have to address the managing committee. Now what do I do?”

“Go on doing what you’re already doing,” I suggest.

“You really think it will work?”

“You’re not going into throes of self-doubt, I hope?”

“I can’t afford a gaffe,” she says. “This is *the* managing committee of Squirrel Inc. Can you imagine?”

“What’s the alternative?” I ask.

“I need to find a new story,” she says.

“Why would you need to do that?” I reply.

“This is the CEO and all his direct reports,” she says. “Think of the risk if they don’t go for it. What do I do?”

“Go on telling your story?”

“I’ve already told it a couple of times,” she says. “Everyone’s getting to know it. The top expects something special.”

“It’s the way you tell it that makes it special.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to tell the story as if you’re living it in your own mind for the first time. It’s the intensity of your belief in the story that sparks the listeners to live it also. If you believe, they too will believe.”

*In performing the story, the storyteller re-lives the story makes it fresh.*

“That’s fine,” she says. “But why not a new story?”

“Just think for a minute,” I say. “If you tell one story to the bottom and then another to the top, then pretty soon everyone starts asking why you’re telling a different story. Is it the truth? Or is she putting us on? When you tell different stories it can put in question your authenticity. If you can get a story that works with the whole organization – the top, the middle, the bottom, the front office, the back office, and so on – it’s generally more effective.”

*The storyteller should try to find a story that works equally well at all levels of the organization.*

“You mean I go on telling the same story forever?”

*Once you find a story that works, you keep using it.*

“No, not forever,” I say. “But it’s not the quantity of stories that matters. It’s the quality. Once you find a story that works, you keep on using it.”

“But if some listeners will hear it over and over, won’t they be bored?”

“Not necessarily,” I say. “Even when they hear it a second time, or even a seventh time, it isn’t necessarily a problem. Remember, this kind of story works in terms of getting the listeners to think of a new story in their own context. So, if it continues to spark a new story from the listener, it doesn’t matter that the storyteller’s story isn’t new. So long as it elicits a new story from the listener, that’s the bottom line.”

“But how can I know that? How can I tell?”

“At the time you’re telling the story, you’ll sense the interest of the listeners. It’s afterwards that you’ll see the real impact.”

“But how?” she says.

“You’ll hear others talking about your story,” I say. “You’ll see action start to materialize. You’ll watch the problems dissolve. If it’s working, you’ll know it when you see it. There’ll be spontaneous enthusiasm.”

“I’ve seen that already,” she says. “By the way, you know what my boss wants me to do?”

“What?”

“He said, ‘Write it up in a memo and distribute it instead.’ What do I do about that?”

“Ignore him.”

“He’s my boss.”

“Play along,” I say. “Do whatever to humor him. Write the memo. Distribute it if it keeps him happy. But it won’t have the same effect.”

“How come?”

“This is not about *story*. It’s about *storytelling*. It’s your interaction face-to-face with individuals that makes the difference.”

*Keep in mind that it’s storytelling, more than the story, that has the impact.*

“Let’s get back to the managing committee,” she says. “Maybe I should get Timmy to come and tell the story?”

“I’m not sure about that,” I say.

“Why?” she asks.

“The big risk in having Timmy tell the story is that he’s so involved in the story he may lose sight of why he’s telling it. I mean, do you think he could tell his story in 45 seconds?”

*Recognize that the protagonist may not be the best person to tell the story.*

“I don’t know,” she says.

“No way!” I say. “Just think. He’s come all the way from the Windy City. He finds himself on center stage at Squirrel Inc. He’s more likely to tell it in 45 minutes than in 45 seconds. His interest is in the Windy City and everything that he did there. He’s so interested in *his own* story, he thinks everyone else is interested too. The challenge is to say just enough to spark a new story in the mind of the listener.”

“I see.”

“Another mineral water?” I say.

“I’m fine,” she says. “But what if it misfires?”

“It won’t. Not if you tell it right.”

“But how do I tell it right?” she says. “The whole thing is terrific so far, don’t get me wrong, but when I tell the story, somehow it doesn’t sound as powerful. How do I get to your level of telling?”

“Practice, practice, practice. And again, more practice.”

“Where?” she says. “And how?”

*Recognize that  
you become a  
better storyteller  
through practice.*

“Anywhere. With anyone who’ll listen. Storytelling is a performance art. Observing what actually works with your audience is key. It’s worked for you so far, right?”

“It did misfire one time,” she says.

“Tell me about it?”

“I talked to a group and no one listened.”

“That can happen.”

“Thanks a lot!”

“Just compare one misfire with what you were doing before. **Nothing** was working before. No one was listening. Now you’re generally having success. You can’t expect one hundred percent triumph. If most of your audiences get it, then you’re way ahead of the game.”

“How can I prevent a misfire?” she says.

“You frame the story.”

“Frame it?”

“Typically audiences aren’t listening to begin with,” I say. “It may look like they’re listening. They’re physically present. They’re staring straight at you. But their minds are somewhere else entirely. They’re sitting there thinking, ‘How do I get out of here? How do I get back to my work and deal with the stuff that’s piling up?’ They’re not listening to you at all.”

*Recognize that initially the audience may not be listening and that you may need to get their attention.*

“So what do I do?” she asks.

“One way,” I say, “is to talk about *their* agenda. There must be something on their minds. So you talk about that. You remind them of what they’re worried about. And you continue: ‘But it’s actually worse than you think. Let me tell you how bad the situation really is!’ You describe their issue in terms that are starker than anything they’ve ever heard before. Suddenly, they’re listening. In fact, they’re riveted on what you’re saying, because this is more than interesting. Now they’re ripe for the story to spark action. Remember how I began the story with you a few days ago?”

*Talking about the listeners’ problems is one way of getting their attention.*

“Not really,” she says.

“It went something like this:

*“I know we’re all worried here at Squirrel Inc. about the decline in revenues from our nut-burying business. Unfortunately, that’s only going to get worse. The humans are digging up the gardens at an ever-increasing pace so that our business can only get smaller. What’s the future going to look like? What will Squirrel Inc. have to do to flourish in these grimmer conditions we’ll be facing?”*

“You talk to the listeners in their terms?” she says.

“That’s one way to do it,” I say. “Another way to get their attention is to make yourself vulnerable. You tell the truth about something to which you have unique access – namely, yourself and your life story.”

*Another way of getting the listeners’ attention is by telling the truth about yourself.*

“Why would anyone be interested in that?” she says. “Squirrel Inc. isn’t a touchy-feely company.”

“You’d be surprised,” I say. “You start to reveal things about yourself that make the audience think, ‘Hey, this isn’t just a messenger with no views of her own. This is an individual with a history. She has personality. She has character. She’s seems to be leveling with us. Maybe she’s telling the truth?’”

“You want me to expose myself?”

“I agree, you need to be careful. You might say some things that could actually set you back. But revealing something vulnerable can make the listeners think of you as an individual, someone worth listening to.”

“I see,” she says, sipping on her mineral water. “How much framing will I need for the managing committee?”

“It depends on whether they’re listening. If they’re listening at the start, then you begin with the story right away.”

“But what if they don’t want a story?” she says. “They didn’t ask for a story. They asked for a strategic plan.”

“You don’t say upfront you’re going to tell a story. In a modern corporation that can set off alarm bells. Instead, you say: ‘Let me tell you about something that happened last winter.’ And if their interest is piqued, they want to find out what happened last winter. And once they’re listening, once they’re following the story, then provided you’re telling it right, they’ll want to hear: ‘What happens next?’. And then: ‘How does it end?’ They’re drawn in by the natural power of storytelling. If things are going well, they’re already thinking: ‘What if we did this in our own context?’”

“This is how you persuade others to buy your idea? Through a story. Amazing!”

“You never persuade others to buy *your* idea. When it comes to something really important, to get any traction, it has to be *their own* idea. If you’re trying to persuade them of *your* idea, you’ll never succeed.”

*The object of the storyteller is to enable the listeners to discover the truth for themselves.*

“How does it become their idea?” she asks.

“The trick is for the listeners to become their own storyteller. When it happens, it happens rapidly. You’re talking about Timmy’s winter in the Windy City and they’re sitting there thinking, ‘We could do this! Why not?’ The listeners are thinking through implementation even while you’re still talking. By the time they leave the meeting, they already know what to do. With any luck, they rush out and get into action.”

“Isn’t this a trick on the listeners? It’s really my idea and I’m tricking them into thinking it’s their own idea?”

*Recognize that organizational storytelling is about telling authentically true stories.*

“Not really,” I say. “It’s up to the listeners whether to invent a new story for themselves. They’re not being deceived. The story they tell themselves really is their own story, not your story. Each listener imagines a slightly different story, depending on her own situation.”

“You mean each listener’s story is different?”

“Precisely,” I say. “The implications of the change idea for each listener will be different.”

“But if each listener creates a different story, they’ll be implementing different ideas. You know how Squirrel Inc. likes neatness and order.”

“Change is never orderly,” I say. “A neat organization is already half dead.”

“That may be, but Squirrel Inc. sure likes to see things tidy.”

“I’m sorry, but the living part of the organization is untidy. It’s a river of informal storytelling. It’s flowing like white water. It’s dynamic and full of life. If you want to interact with an organization, you have to get into that river. You’ve got to swim in it and with it.”

She takes a long swallow. “You know it’s terrible in a way.”

“What?”

“I come into a bar one day,” she says, “and after that, the whole world seems different. Now everywhere I look, I see stories. In the workplace. In meetings. In bars. In parties. Everywhere. It’s pretty much all we do. Tell stories. Listen to stories. How come I never noticed this before?”

“You were taught to ignore it. So you ignored it.”

“I need to re-think everything,” she says. My day. My job. My career. My life.”

“For most individuals, it’s a big shift,” I say. “But hey! You’re not the first one to make it. There are others in Squirrel Inc. who are using storytelling.”

“What are they using it for?”

“Build community, transmit values, tame the grapevine, you name it,” I say.

“With the trouble Squirrel Inc. is in, I need to hear more.”

“Why don’t I invite them all to the bar here one night?”.

“Who are they?” she says. “And how come I haven’t heard about this before?”

I’m about to reply when one of my scruffier clients stumbles into the bar.

“Well, well, well” he says, without noticing that he’s interrupting, “what have we here? Two conniving schemers! More trouble for Squirrel Inc.!”

“Hi, Mocha,” I say. “What’ll it be?”

“I can see it would be indiscreet of me to ask what you two are dreaming up?” Mocha continues. “No, don’t tell me! Not another new strategy for Squirrel Inc.? First, we had nut-burying and then there was nut-storing. Next, what will it be? I’ve had it with zigs and zags! For heaven’s sake, give us clarity! Clarity, clarity, clarity! You overpaid drones have so little to do, surely you could manage that?”

“The usual? Double ferment?”

“Exactly what I need to soothe and cool the ferment in my brain,” says Mocha. “What a day I’ve had! So much commotion over what? Froth and bubble! Just when I thought I knew where Squirrel Inc. was heading, confusion makes his masterpiece. And now you two will double the trouble. Go ahead! Prove me wrong!”

“I’ll do that,” says Diana, “Give me a couple of days.”

“You see what I mean,” says Mocha. “A loyal employee of the great and noble firm of Squirrel Inc. has the temerity to petition for a smidgen of illumination from an illustrious champion of management, and what does he get? Subterfuge. Fog. Side-swerving deferral. You’ll excuse me if I drink to your good health, my friends, while warning you that your nut-storing strategy doesn’t have a hazelnut’s chance in hell of being implemented.”

“Why do you say that?” says Diana.

“The centurion guards!” says Mocha. “Watch out for the centurion guards! They protect and suckle the soul of the corporation to save it from basic change. A corporation, you see, is a very delicate mechanism. It doesn’t suffer fundamental adjustment to its navigational system. Sure, you’ve made great presentations. Sure, you feel you’re making gains. But wait till the managing committee. It’ll be a different story. Trust me, I’ve seen it before. That’s what the managing committee is for: to grind any bright new ideas into tiny, tiny pieces.”

“We’ll see about that,” says Diana calmly.

“Believe me, it’s been tried,” says Mocha, passing his woodcup towards me for another double ferment. “Bold ideas. Brilliant thinking. Startling far-reaching plans, as full of promise as the bright summer sunshine, and then just when you’re not expecting it, just when you’re celebrating victory, they vote you off the island and you’re doing the walk of shame. All that excitement and high-flying comes to nothing!”

“Excuse me,” says Diana abruptly. “You remind me: I have work to do.”

“Good luck,” I’m about to say, but she’s gone even before I can speak.

“Why did you do that?” I ask Mocha, passing him his extra-ferment.

“Introducing some reality into a conversation is always useful,” he says, as the evening rush starts to come in all at once. Now I’ve no longer time for thought, let alone talk.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

### PERFORMING THE STORY TO SPARK ACTION

A story is always a selection of events from a wider universe of possibilities. In performing a springboard story, a leader has no need to acknowledge the selections, the exclusions, or alternative points of view. These choices are made silently and out of the listeners' sight. Once made, the choices do not appear as choices at all. In performance, the story appears inevitable.

#### ***Some suggestions for performing the story:***

- *Leaders immerse themselves in the world of the listeners – their language, habits, fears and dreams.*
- *The leader makes the story fresh by reliving it as it is told.*
- *The leader focuses on perfecting a few stories that work well with a broad range of audiences, rather than trying to gather a large variety of different stories.*
- *The leader enhances the storytelling performance through constant practice so that the story sounds like spontaneous conversation, as if an accomplished companion wanted to pass on something fresh and interesting that had just been thought of.*
- *In telling a story, there is a symmetry between leader and listeners: although the leader may have a wider experience than the listeners, the leader trusts the listeners to come to the same conclusion as the leader if given the same experience. The leader's purpose is to put the listeners in a position to achieve that parity. A leader tells the story so that the listeners discover the idea for themselves.<sup>20</sup>*
- *To get the listeners' attention before telling the story, the leader can frame the story either by talking about the listeners' problems or by revealing a vulnerability.*

A leader is not like a television cook showing viewers, step-by-step, how to make the perfect soufflé. The hard work of storytelling is performed invisibly. The leader is like the chef whose work is presented at table: such a chef neither allows the diners to see the labor that went into its creation nor expects them to share it. There are no salt-and-pepper shakers on the table.<sup>21</sup>