

AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM STUART

Keynote Speaker at the Smithsonian Storytelling Symposium in Washington DC 2016

by Steve Denning



Background: *Jim Stuart will be a keynote speaker at the Smithsonian storytelling weekend in Washington DC on April 21, 2006. Jim is the former president and CEO of Val-Pak, founding executive director of The Florida Aquarium, and co-founder of The Leadership Circle, will examine how the organizational story” and the personal leadership story” are similar and different in their impact on the collective. One builds vision alignment; the other trust. Both are essential capacities in an effective, humane enterprise.*

SD: Jim, what are you going to be talking about at the Smithsonian?

JS: I’ll be looking at the organizational and the personal story. the organizational story fosters the vision alignment and the personal story builds, or can build trust.

I’ll be focusing less on how we break through the normal resistance to new stuff in presentations we make, and look into the longer time frame. Let’s assume we have used a great springboard story. People have dropped out of their pure cognitive, rational space, and are in imaginative space, the land of story and image and poetry. An image is now present, through the story, where they can emotionally relate to it.

And what is powerful about this approach is that they can appropriate this image, this generative story to their own self, in ways that fit them precisely, even if it is somewhat different for each person. An image, after all, such as what the World Bank or the Florida aquarium could be will hit people in very different ways. But it will hit them all nevertheless. And they are encouraged to creatively engage in the creation of this image, which includes some of the bells and whistles that they have imagined for their version of the image.

I will work with the Florida Aquarium story, and how this generative image of a world class aquarium arose as a true possibility in people’s minds through the springboard story of the

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Monterey and the Baltimore Aquariums, that had just been opened for a few years and had galvanized their entire communities. They were each in some way thought to be impossible to do, but they both were done.

This was the springboard: Monterey and Baltimore did the impossible. Why not Tampa? But the building of the story into a coherent vision, not exact replicas in everyone's mind, but aligned and coherent, this took time. And a lot of listening and trust. Actually, not too much at first. Just respect, great listening, and modest ingenuity. But once we had alignment on vision, the world fell apart, about three or four times actually.

And here is where the personal story made a huge, perhaps decisive difference. In the dark hours, the shared vision was central, but so was the trust. And I will show how this came out of the very personal story of mine, the willingness to be vulnerable, to admit when I had no idea what was going on, and an absolute fierceness around the truth.

Aligned and generative vision with deep trust creates the high-powered teams that invite the miraculous. In fact they do so almost predictably.

SD: What's the role of story in leadership?

JS: The story never goes away. The first one springs you into the open attention of your early audiences and gets them believing in something worthy and amazing and almost impossible but then maybe possible. It then becomes the vision story...the World Bank as the knowledge bank...the Florida Aquarium painting a picture so beautiful that, like George Rouault said of his paintings...people will believe, and the world will be changed. The springboard story becomes the generative image that draws us into the work, each with his/her own precise painting or writing of this general image and story. And then the personal story can open people to that most unusual commodity in business...deep trust...which has enormous curative powers when present.

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SD: How do you go about getting people to live the change?

JS: My exercises with folks will be along these lines: Remember, and then share with your neighbor, when you have been part of a team where there was a powerful and generative vision, and when in your own personal life you have felt most sure of your own personal and noble purpose, and how did you show up in the world when you felt this way, and how did the group you worked with respond to your commitment.

SD: How do you build high performing teams?

JS. I want to offer a hypothesis: High performing teams are not built through engineering or science. It is not a mechanical model, but an organic, living model. Individual behavior, group performance, and the activities of a system are driven initially from what lies in the interior spaces of the individual and the collective. One of those "interior things" is thoughts. Another is attitudes,

a sort of a collection (often buried) of thoughts about a particular topic or experience (ie, tall people are better leaders). Other "interior things" are emotions, energy, spirit, and the like. Most everything is stored "in language", but there seems to be an audio-visual department in our consciousness, where sounds, images, and beyond are stored. I believe it's this multi-media audio visual department that "good stories" reach. They get filed in the Word Document section of our brain as well, but they swirl around in this amazing "image center", which poets and many others call the imagination.

This domain is what gives access to emotions and spirit. And this is the crucible in which high performing teams are formed, and the domain where they go to receive their alchemical powers. Stories work to give us access to this space because as soon as I hear the equivalent of "Once upon a time...", I take off my cognitive, scientific, needing-to-judge receiver...loosen my belt a notch...let out a sigh...and say "Yes...what happened then?"

SD: What's the role of stories in collaboration?

JS: Stories include and then transcend the cognitive mind, giving us access to the deeper domain of heart and spirit. Stories let each of us access this domain for ourselves, following our own personal, stored image trail. When enough of us have followed a good introductory narrative into the deeper terrain of spirit and imagination, we may be ready to "sign on" to and help cocreate a high performing team. A leader who "holds the space" and "makes the container safe and trustworthy" is now needed...the sculptor, who will mold this energy into a coherent form, which becomes the high performing team, as molten spirit and heart cool and take manifest form. And now that we are back in the visible world, we need supportive behavior models and a system design that supports the deep intentions.

So, stories suspend disbelief, and in doing so, quiet the mind and so the door to the domain of the imagination lies wide open.

SD: What role does diversity have in high-performance teams?

JS: True diversity, which becomes a truly plural community, is only formed, I believe, when individuals can connect, in fact, can play in this space, truly seeing who each other is...and beyond "only seeing" (which is a lot!)...we "know" them, we experience the other as a "friend in the kingdom". And when those beginning friends go into "war" together, they become the storied "band of brothers and sisters" who eventually will walk together on the water.

SD: Have you had any experiences in this area?

JS: Something like this has happened to me a number of times. I am blessed to have it happening again now. A small group of us are working to help people uncover their own deep and personal purpose stories; in churches, schools, hospitals and other organizations. Our little

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venture is called Noble Purpose Partners, based on the book written by my friend and partner, Dr. Barery Heermann, **Noble Purpose: Exciting Extraordinary Passion for Life and Work.**

Don't delay - register now for the Smithsonian Storytelling Weekend!

For the Friday event, go to:

<http://residentassociates.org/otoapr/storytelling.asp>

For the Saturday event, go to:

<http://www.goldenfleececon.org/>

For details of both day's events: go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/Smithsonian06-r2.html>

To watch a short video (3 megs) on the event, go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Smithsonian2006.wmv>

To download a brochure (96 kb) that you can share with colleagues and friends, go to:

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