

Open Story System and Strategy,

Don Miller, (c) 2013

1. Let's admit that not everything in life is a story, for it to be a story it has to catch someone's interest. Routines of all sorts are passed over.
2. But nearly anything may be incorporated into a story, if it fits into a larger whole which is a story.
3. A story must be someone's story. The most obvious is the narrator. The next most obvious is the protagonist, or anyone who identifies with the protagonist. This may be one person or a multitude, who one way or another are witnesses to the story.
4. The story a person tells someone captivates. The oral presentation and the relationship with the hearer augments personal investment.
5. The above are usually told in the past tense, as something which somehow has happened to someone, but the fact that they're related in the here and how increases their impact.
6. The background taken for granted in all the above, as in the story's content. or in the quality its presentation by the narrator--- all this tends to operate on a less conscious level, but its relevance may be more vital than is usually appreciated.
7. A story we read---for fun (not as an assignment) has as its context a) how we happened to chose this particular story at this time, which includes what we expect to find there, b) our previous experience with the author. and/or familiarity with the lead character. c) how we've felt on completion of this and similar stories. d) whether we speak about this story with other persons. How interested were they? e) whether this is a best seller or is effectively advertised somewhere.
- 8) A dramatized story greatly increases its potential impact on one's own life story, and especially when one becomes a member of the cast, as in a psychodrama. Opportunities for improvisation increase this ever further.
- 9) A story we know which has somehow entered into a dream carries symbolic impact--- though we may not know on a conscious level its meaning. Was the dream a nightmare, a recurring dream, a lucid dream? What associations does the dreamer have to the dream. Let the leader beware of interpreting the dream, or of validating the dream. His role is to accept the dream and the story behind it as belonging to the dreamer. He does not go beyond what Freud called the manifest dream. When this comes up in a group, the group must understand their comments matter more to the commenter than to the dreamer. What is correct for the hearer may be incorrect or untimely for the dreamer.
- 10) What the open story system has set up is 28 plots (or more recently) 24 stories, intended as a manageable grouping to give the leader or director a running start on where the client or protagonist is coming from. He does not share his choice as such, which allows ongoing modification as evidence accumulates. The leader remains open.
- 11) Emotion is the base level, immediately apparent in the affect the person shows (and/or seeks to cover up or explain away). The leader welcomes or accepts whatever it is. One is careful to set forth the policy that acceptance does not mean agreement with the protagonist's interpretation.

12) It is easier for the leader to do this if he insists on bringing to the surface the background (which may or may not try the client's patience). Questions like "What is this?" or better, "Where are we?" "Is this indoors or outdoors?" "Show us what you see (hear, taste, smell...etc) and where on stage it is." "We're not looking for your point of view yet. You know what we don't, and we want you to tune us in, so that we'll understand you better when we get to the action." Artistic persons do this very well; concrete persons have trouble meeting the director's expectations.

13) Persons who have been in treatment expect the question "why?" at the outset and are eager to oblige with an answer. I delay this as long as possible. It easily breaks through in the action. Here the central problem which has been impeding growth surfaces. I do not pounce upon it. If one asks whether I agree with his point of view, I say that I need to see more. I compliment him on the fact he has found a meaning, not on the specific meaning he's found. I make no secret of the fact that there are more points of view for stories than there are stories, and they often change while we are in the process of living them through. All of us are more than the opinions we hold for a while.

14) As I bring audience to the stage as auxiliaries or double, the protagonist without being told so directly becomes aware that more than one point of view for the same situation is possible. In one to one situations the leader must take some of these roles. Having one other person present greatly eases the director's task.

15) I've reduced the number of affects to five. Actually more than twice that number may be recognized. The affects are biologically based in the autonomic nervous system, with two branches, the 'sympathetic and para-sympathetic. The former is set up for emergencies. the latter is contrasting conservative. (The latter does include sexual response, but if this is a problem area, there may be an immediate flash to the red flag danger signal, which comes with the sympathetic nervous system). Four of the five categories we use anyone recognizes immediately: anxious-fearful, negative-depressed, angry, and positive-happy. I invented the term "mobilized" to complete the range of possibilities.

16) All the broad affect categories have been set up to include four or five recurring situations in which a particular affect is likely to occur. Do not regard these merely as lists, for they have been arranged to place similar nearer to each other. The 28 plots (or 24 stories) have been arranged in a circle. Those farthest lie across the diameter, 180 degrees from each other. Although we recognize differences within story, plot, theme and premise, we do not make use of the distinction at an early stage.

17) For example, early in the development of this system I used the words story and plot interchangeably. To be more accurate, story is the inclusive term while plot occurs within the story and largely makes it interesting as a story which we may remember. Plot or plots are the key to the life-story, but they are also likely to be what is amiss when our life story is not working for us. Plot answers the question "Why?" and points us to what may be the cause of the situation we are living through.

18) "Cause" is a slippery term, which calls forth "praise" or "blame." What is important for our system is that "cause be owned," We advocate agency, in order that one may not drown as the "victim." Of course it is a fact that at one time or another an observer would regard us as victims, but every protagonist is simultaneously "subject" and "object," both the actor and the one acted upon. Whatever the grave situation facing us, the response we make is in our hands, leading to options which make the situation better or worse. We take responsibility for whatever it is that we do. This requires complete honesty, the courage to face the 'shadow' part of ourselves, and the willingness to take a stand and face the consequences.

19) Time offers pitfalls. The past seems to be beyond changing. The future likewise seems not to be under our control. The fantasy life may be seen as an escapist sanctuary, or as an opportunity to consider options. Our task, through staging and the use of the present tense, is to make all of these available for action and reaction in the here and now.

20) Scientific habits often lead to seeking explanations in the past determining where we are in the present. The weakness here is in the observer point of view. We're not up in the valley; we're down in the arena. The approach of motivation makes change more difficult. It diminishes autonomy, whereas a well developed personal identity takes us elsewhere. "I am the kind of person who does (or doesn't) do this or that." I am not like a billiard ball pushed from my past. Rather the past is in my hands and I can intend quite a different situation for my future.

21) I am not the passive prey of random events. My reaction allows me to predict and anticipate where I'm headed when I do this or that. I am always headed somewhere working at something I desire. My beliefs are a factor in what I believe may be possible (and am therefore willing to try). Desire includes not only what I want, but also what I think I ought to want.

22) This takes us back to personal identity. Oneself may be large or small. The concrete live on a small stage. The larger self may include a huge outer world or inner world. The often unrecognized inner world includes a small number of persons prominent in one's earliest life, family members, friends and neighbors---only a few. These few serve as templates for all subsequent relationships. That doesn't mean these fully explain all we are and do. The danger is that they may be used to explain away the trouble we're in. Our options are not so restricted, but knowing who I am requires that I be aware of where they may be taking me.

23) Causation happens to be in Aristotle's writing on Physics, which reflects the observer view he has taken. Let's see what we can learn from his four types:

a) **Material:** This has to do with what an object consists of. It operates like a parameter. We can do a lot of things with wood, but it is obvious there are some things that cannot be done with wood. To apply to human beings, my DNA opens some doors and closes others. Who I am becoming in life operates in what I can and cannot do. What I actually do is constrained by other things.

b) **Formal:** I think we owe this to Plato's theory of forms. It has to do with the "isness" of objects and persons. Everything which has a name we identify with a pattern, the pattern which makes it what it is. It's not necessary to suppose there is a perfect chair somewhere (where?) for which all that functions as a chair takes its form. Suffice it to say, it's what individually constitutes diverse persons or things, in the midst of the apparently universal possibles. In the open system we may think of the archetypes, such as the self as formal cause.

c) **efficient:** We speak of "succession," as A follows B. This is what most people mean by "cause, and we speak naively when we say this causes that, when all we can find is the succession itself---no cause as a separate entity. I wonder at the interest in the brain as if there were a single area there to be found as a specific cause. Of course the germ theory of disease identifies something visible in the lab, but we also know that in the presence of the germ some get the disease and some don't. If we must, let us speak of 'a cause," not of "the cause." Like, a cause of death, not the cause of death. Let's take the positive view, and see what teleology offers us.

d) **Final:** Most often ignored by philosophers, unless they also happen to be theologians. The final cause of a life-story is where it ends, or short of that, the direction in which it is headed. Unless the scientist is an evolutionary biologist this version of cause doesn't come into his thinking. Final cause figures prominently in the open story system. Intentionality. the pull from the future, we find more productive than motivation, the push from the past. Intentionality is wide open. Causation is closed.

The former stresses freedom, the latter determinism. Life offers us both, but we believe that to be a whole mature human being requires that the accent be on one's intentions. What kind of future do I want for my life story? This will be seen as goal oriented, very congenial to the American culture, at least of the 19th century American version, as the myth of the self-made man threatens to vanish from most American aspirations. We may be forced to teach there are other kinds of success than financial. Then one may order his choices so that his life-story will be in accord with what he wants.

24) A reference to Immanuel Kant may be in order. He sought to make a place for reason in response to Hume's skepticism. He lived in a larger world than Hume. In acknowledging the limitations of reason, he showed what reason can and cannot do. He did not write off causation, but he showed us its proper place as one of the (12!) categories through which we engage the world. We cannot perceive things-in-themselves. Our sensory and association equipment is too limited. But we can deal with appearances, providing us with a basis for living. Later Kant responded to something deeper within him, a faith which reaches beyond the categories. One may say Kant looked to the starry sky, while Jung looked to what lay beneath the ground. He postulated a collective unconscious beyond all our personal unconsciousness. Something like "soul" springs from or reaches into that, the totality making us who we are. His concept of soul, which I cannot develop here, has us reaching forward, and in that forward thrust manifesting who we are. This is congenial with the open story system.

25) I took my cue from what I know of my native tongue. Transitive verbs are prominent in our language. The subject ("I" in my system) acts upon (the simple verb) something else, the (direct) object. What better way to express 'process,' ever changing, ever moving somewhere. In our system we do not take on the whole world, but on the portion that concerns itself with human interactions. We concentrate on an individual, the "you outside the story" and the "you within the story." Therapists all too often neglect the context of the ongoing therapeutic session itself as they concentrate upon the content of which the client speaks within the session. (Finally the psychoanalysts 'discovered' the transference, heralding the end of the treatment). Psychodrama directors involve the whole group, and make the client responsible for his treatment, thereby diluting 'transference' as a factor. If the therapist has a clear sense of boundaries to model for the group, the open story system avoids the transference detour. Here we concentrate on what goes on with representative others within the session and its parallels in the life-story interactions outside the session.

26) What happens within the client Mark Turner shows us in his literary analysis of the parable. A narrator tells a group a commonly acceptable usually well known short story that stirs up crowd sympathy for a sufferer and anger at those who made his life miserable. The story-teller may cap it off with a question which reflects the point of his source story. Suddenly the hearers discover they have been rooting for the wrong crowd, and are as much villains as those they righteously condemn. The source story operates like a template over the life story they live, showing them they are not whom they thought they were. They have been impaled on the parable's single point. Now it's their move. The parable discloses how their routines and associations have clouded their self-perception. Now that they see it, they are in a position to do otherwise. Their choice.

27) Structured individual and group situations use enactment to mirror back to the client the life he is leading, which has gone amiss. In the process of representing his situation in its fullness, he sees matters he previously overlooked, and now he'd like to rehearse doing something different. He also is coming to grasp more clearly what he wants for himself. He is in the midst of re-enactment whereby the situation changes in various ways. Out of these he selects maybe another goal or another means for achieving that goal. Peers have found him acceptable at his worst, and support his quest for his best, No longer alone, with options he hadn't seen before, he finds his life-story opening before him.

28) Caring persons lacking familiarity with psychodrama may find my constant references annoying. Please forgive me, for it is the source of my creativity. Remember that nearly anything in life can be staged, or presented as a short story or a novel. The dramatic moves the story along quickly. One is less likely to get lost between the beginning and the end. When the lead character is historical or fictional, the 'distance' protects us, but when what stands before me is my very own life story---or if it's someone close to me, urgency accelerates. I present a way of thinking which is not finished. It is in process. I offer it to you for however you choose to use it, in the hope that sharing it with you may stimulate your creativity. I can see applications everywhere. Maybe you will too.