

Sharing stories sustains our entire species

by Mark Pavilons

We humans come from a long line of storytellers.

It's in our blood.

'A single conversation across the table with a wise man is better than 10 years mere study of books,' said Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

I can attest to that myself and I read thousands of words each week.

Like art and music, our history and passion for storytelling is an integral part of who we are. It's all about conveying important messages, sharing traditions and breathing life into history.

Without carvings, paintings, written texts, we would know nothing about our past. Believe me, it's rich and those ancient tales beg to be relived, retold, over and over.

Storytelling through oral tradition dates back to different points in history, depending on the culture. Some involved songs, chants and epic poems to tell stories that had been handed down from generation to generation.

Myths and legends were also first passed on through word of mouth. Where would we be without the stories of King Arthur, Homer's Odyssey or Shakespeare's dramas?

Oral myths in North America are common among our Indigenous Peoples. The concept of Turtle Island and countless sagas of Tricksters are rich, colourful and so very important. It's about our roots, our very essence on this planet.

Traditional storytelling led to written tales and documents, highlighting events of the day.

The narrative voice in writing speaks volumes about each of the culture's everyday life. What some accounts lack in action and adventure, they make up for in the fabric of community and family.

Epic poems could fill hundreds of pages in a book, but early examples by Greek writers really showcased the art of storytelling. Legends of Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Achilles, Spartacus are still reimagined to this day.

Our yarns come down to people - typical human beings capable of great things. The historical folklore is about humans and nature, about unearthing mysteries. It's about the magic that created us.

And who better to tell such tales than us?

No matter who you are or where you come from, I'm sure you have dozens of anecdotes, fables and fantastic stories to share. If you're lucky to have parents and grandparents, you likely heard a few over Easter dinner.

My advice is to hold these moments, and these messages, dear. You will be the guardian of your family's novels.

I learned that there are libraries in Denmark where you can borrow people instead of books. It involves sitting and chatting with one another for 30 minutes. All you get is a name tag with a title, that says something like 'unemployed, refugee, bipolar' and you just listen without judging. The Human Library is apparently active in more than 80 countries.

The library publishes people as open books.

?All of our human books are volunteers with personal experience with their topic.

?The Human Library is, in the true sense of the word, a library of people. We host events where readers can borrow human beings serving as open books and have conversations they would not normally have access to. Every human book from our bookshelf, represent a group in our society that is often subjected to prejudice, stigmatization or discrimination because of their lifestyle, diagnosis, belief, disability, social status, ethnic origin etc.

?The Human Library is a place where difficult questions are expected, appreciated and answered.?

What an amazing idea. I?believe this is something that every community should have and could really benefit from.

My wife once worked at a nursing home and the stories she heard from residents were remarkable.?They ranged from war tales and business ventures to travel and anecdotes from the ?good, old days.?

Many of us may have disregarded our parents' stories of growing up with nothing, walking to school through 10 feet of snow, and so on. But we remember them, often with fondness.

My parents' tales are part of who I am, and how I?came to be. There's no way that's inconsequential or meaningless. It's vital to my family's journey and lineage.

While some have faded from memory, when my kids ask I share what I remember about my parents. If we all thought about it, our personal tidbits would be a great foundation for a Netflix movie or TV sitcom. That's because our stories are real ? you can't make this stuff up!

Because we have common ancestry and our fellow men and women experience life's tribulations, it's important to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. We don't know their ?back stories.?

It's been said that the story behind rude behaviour won't make you angry, it will break your heart.

?There is no such thing as a worthless conversation, provided you know what to listen for. And questions are the breath of life for a conversation,? according to James Nathan Miller.

He is so right. In my career, I estimate that I?have interviewed or spoken with as many as 10,000 people. Not all were in-depth discussions mind you, but at least half were meaningful exchanges and fascinating learning experiences.

And that's the fundamental charm of this profession. It's selfish, really.

I find that in every interview, I take much more than I?give. I learn so much from someone I feel bad sometimes.

Many of my subjects are like mentors, teachers, and storytellers in their own right.?I'm not creating non-fiction, I'm merely relaying someone else's exciting novel in concise fashion.

I'm like a script writer, who's condensing someone's life into a 900-word summary.

We should all continue to share stories because deep down, it's what makes us all human.