

Why Wasn't My Story Chosen?

By Sue Black

We've all been there -- seated in the Northlands concert audience, anticipating the storytelling performance, and silently wondering yet again "Why wasn't my story chosen?"

I've been on all sides of that question. Stories I have submitted for concerts have not been chosen. Other stories have. Heck, one story rejected one year was selected the next! Talk about frustrating! I've also been on several listening committees that review taped submissions. All is not lost. At least I can now console myself by hoping that, if nothing else, these experiences have given me some perspective on the question, **"Why wasn't my story chosen?" I'll try to answer that question with a few of my own.**

Who cares? Do you care? What is in your story that people will care about and relate to? Whether telling a personal story, folk tale or fairy tale, know the universal truth. Know why you are telling it and what relevance it might have for your listeners. If you are telling a personal story, know if you have moved beyond a pleasant memory and created a story others can relate to. Does it remind them of their own mother/father/aunt/uncle/sister/brother? Or is just about yours?

What do you like about the story? Can you identify what inspires you to tell the story? What images resonate with you? Know the answers to these questions and you will be able to communicate them to your listeners. I tell a story at Halloween that is a real crowd-pleaser, scary and suspenseful. But that's not why I chose to tell it. What I like about the story is a specific scene of one brother going back to rescue the other, holding him in his arms with tears in his eyes, all memories of the earlier fight between them gone. Scaring people is just a fringe benefit.

Have you taken the time to craft your story? Have you considered phrasing and word choice? Have you considered them again . . . and again? Do you have a beginning that immediately draws your listeners in and makes them want to hear more? Is there a flow to the story, with transitions that move it forward? Have you crafted an ending or do you merely stop? Is it creative and unique? Does your story sound like it is straight out of a book? Have you edited the story? Have you edited it again? Have you told it out loud and edited it again?

Have you painted a picture with your words? Have you taken us into your story so that we can see the characters, touch the surroundings, smell the air, and hear the noises that fill it so that we can experience the story for ourselves? Can your listeners close their eyes and become part of the story and its rich emotions?

Have you practiced the story? Have you told it out loud so that it flows smoothly? Did you read the story you submitted? Trust me, the reviewers can tell.

Is it your story? Are you telling a folktale in the style you first heard it, or have you read several versions and found your own unique way to tell the story? You're not telling someone else's personal story, are you? Just because you read it on the internet or in one of those Chicken Soup books or a magazine, or just because you heard it on a tape you purchased, you do know it is not your story to tell, right?

Are we hearing 'you'? Are you using your 'regular' voice, or are you using your 'storyteller's voice' that places a barrier between you and your listener?

Okay. Now you've gotten plenty of questions to ask yourselves, how about asking someone else for answers? Have you gotten feedback from someone other than your mother, spouse or child? This is territory for the brave of heart. You're placing yourself in a vulnerable position. Find someone you trust and whose work you respect. Agree that the feedback will be honest and that the goal is to improve the story and the telling; it is not an opportunity to remake you in someone else's image. Ask the person giving you feedback a couple of questions:

What can you visualize best in my story? What was difficult for you to visualize?

How was my pacing? Was there a logical progression? Were you confused in any part of the story? Were any parts unclear?

Was it an appropriate length? Did it drag on in some parts? Did I rush through other parts?

Did you have any emotional attachment to the story? Did you experience a variety of emotions throughout the story?

Is my telling style appropriate? Do I appear relaxed?

And now, back to your self-examination. **Have you performed the story?** Is there interaction with the audience? Do they laugh, sigh, gasp; do you ask any question that draws them in? Do you pause in your telling to allow the audience to think, remember, and laugh? Are you racing through? Have you figured out what works with an audience and what does not? Have you gone back to the drawing board and fixed what needs fixing?

Too many questions? Not enough answers? It's all part of the growing-a-story process. Submitting taped stories for review is a tricky business. I'm still wondering about that story of mine that was not selected one year and then selected the next. Who knows? There is no eye contact and personal connection; definitely a big piece of the puzzle is missing. It's not an exact science and you are subject to the mood, whim and personal style of the reviewer. Good people are submitting good stories, and the reviewers would like to include them all. But there just isn't enough room for all of them in the concert. So next time, before you send in what represents your best work, consider doing a little extra homework to make your story stand out and ask yourself a couple of questions.